

## Paying it Forward:

### My Journey as an Ally into the Welcoming Story of Scripture

Coming Out Week Keynote by David R. Weiss

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#### Welcome & Thanks

Welcome and thanks for coming. I'm glad to be here, and I want to thank everyone who made my time on campus possible, but especially Chaplain Rachel Larson whose many hours of planning have made my time here not only possible, but well-planned. And I do thank you for coming. Your open hearts and minds, as well as your sincere questions and doubts, are welcome here. I'll speak for about 45 minutes, and then I'll open up for a time of dialogue with all of you.

So let's begin ...

#### With a bit of my journey

I was born into a German Lutheran family about fifty years ago ... early on Christmas morning. I attended church every Sunday of my childhood unless I was sick. We said table grace each night before mealtime—even at restaurants. I attended a Lutheran Day School from first grade through eighth grade. After four years in a public high school, I went off to Wartburg College, where I studied psychology and sociology, minoring in religion. After that I attended Wartburg Seminary where I completed a Masters degree in Theology and later on the University of Notre Dame, where I completed a second Masters degree, this one in Christian Ethics. And I've taught theology and religion at Notre Dame, Luther College, Augsburg College, Hamline University, and St. Catherine University.

My life is steeped in the Lutheran faith, in active church involvement ... *and in an unquestionable heterosexual identity*. So how did I reach a point where as a married straight man I quit my job and began working fulltime on my own to urge people of faith and communities of faith to becoming fully welcoming to LGBTQ persons?

*My journey begins in the heart*. In my own hunger to pray. As a fifth grader with an uncomfortably precocious spirituality. I wanted a nearness to God that nothing in my reserved German-American upbringing prepared me for.

But I was blessed with a fifth grade Sunday School teacher named Dale. He opened our classes, usually amid the rampant chaos of about-to-be adolescents, with prayer. With prayer that breathed nearness. Dale prayed by setting aside all the formal ways to address God that I recited in worship from the hymnal. He didn't begin with pretty pieties. He launched into prayer like a cannonball dive into a swimming pool. Like the way you might

begin an eager conversation with a parent, breathlessly racing into the kitchen at the end of a full day. He prayed with passion. Not hyper-passion, but mundane real in-your-gut passion. He spoke to a God who was palpably real, palpably present. A God I wanted to know.

Maybe five years later, in high school, I learned that Dale, who had moved on from teaching Sunday School to attending seminary, had been unceremoniously invited *not* to return for his second year of seminary after being outed as a gay man to administrators by a classmate. He returned to my hometown, broken-hearted, and he ran his parents' pet shop for years until that went out of business. His last job was at a feed and grain company where, like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, he found himself far from home ... selling food for pigs. I'll pick up that tragic tale again in a moment.

But when I learned that Dale was gay, I realized that his posture of prayer was hard-won. His casual confidence in God's presence was never taken for granted. And although it faltered and faded in his later years, that was not because of weakness on Dale's part; it was because of the relentless lack of good news in the church's response to him.

*My journey begins in the heart*. In my own longing for authenticity and vocation. For lifework that is true to me and that feeds my soul. At age 22 I headed off to seminary, not at all sure that I belonged there. I knew only that I wanted to know more about God ... and that I deeply loved words and writing.

My parents, my extended family, my pastors, and my seminary teachers were all glad to see me there. But when I asked if I could be a writer for the church, I was told, "Well ... the church doesn't ordain writers. We're glad you're here and all, but you'll need to fit into our box to have a place in the church." This was a real dilemma for me.

Writing was how I breathed. It was where I felt my deepest joy. It was how I invested myself in the world. It was a fundamental way that I was me. But it seemed that to serve the church I would need to box it up and set it aside.

For most of my classmates that was no big deal. They said, "David, just be a pastor. You can always write a little bit here and there on the side." But that wasn't where writing fit in my life—"at the side."

And these were the persons who understood my dilemma: my gay and lesbian seminary friends, Dick, Kathi, Don, Ruth, Paul and Bonnie.

They heard a different but similar message. "Well, the church doesn't ordain gay or lesbian persons. We're glad you're here and all, but you'll need to fit into our box—you'll need to act straight—to have a place in the church."

When I froze and couldn't commit to being a pastor, they understood the price it would've cost me. Some of them chose the closet in order to serve the church. Others chose to leave seminary and pursue second-choice careers. But, like me, they all felt the weight of being told by the church that the best way they could serve God was by being less than true to who they were as persons.

I had not yet sorted out all the biblical passages or the moral questions about homosexuality. But I had met the people themselves, and I had found them bright, compassionate, gracious, and committed to serving the same God I longed to serve. Indeed, they had taught me to pray. They had kept me company in my vocational journey. How could I not join them on theirs?

*My journey begins in the heart.* In anguish and anger. After seminary, which I completed in starts and stops and without ever becoming ordained, I spent several years working in warehouses and restaurant kitchens. It was good work, but far from vocation for me. Eventually I went back to graduate school, where I completed a second Master's degree, this one in Christian Ethics. This degree allowed me to wrestle with the biblical, theological, and moral questions using my intellect, but the journey continued in my heart as well.

A couple years into my graduate work at Notre Dame, which was just 30 miles from my hometown, my mother called to tell me that Dale had suffered a massive stroke. At only age 46, his body gave out after years of treating his anguish with destructive living. He sought to ease the pain of a ruptured vocation by burying it in excessive drink and food.

After the stroke Dale never recovered. He just lingered, half-dead, for nearly 30 months. Paralyzed on the left side of his body, he never walked again. I visited him twice a month in the nursing home. Some days we talked. Some days his speech was so slurred I could only nod and hope that I might guess his meaning. At some point in the spring of 1996, Dale saw the end in sight. He told me that he wasn't going to live much longer. And he asked me—the man who chose not to be a pastor—to preach the sermon at his funeral. He explained through lips that had long ago refused to cooperate with clarity any longer, “Because David, you know me. You know who I am. You preach.”

And so I did. I struggled to find words of comfort and hope for those who gathered to mourn his death. He had never come out to his family. To them he was still the gifted kid who lost his way, who inexplicably drank himself to death. They never knew how wounded he was or why. In the same room, listening to the same sermon, were Dale's friends. They knew he was gay and they couldn't understand why he hadn't left the church that caused him so much torment before it killed him.

I never spoke the words out loud, but my own tears that day became a promise to myself to never ever miss an opportunity to speak a word of comfort and hope to a gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender person. *Not ever.*

Over the long months at Dale's bedside, my journey changed me forever.

None of this—from those first Sunday School prayers to the seminary friendships to the bedside vigil—none of it made the Bible irrelevant. But it sent me to the Bible with questions that were far from abstract or hypothetical. They were questions with faces and names. Questions marked by real lives—and, in Dale's case, by real death.

But don't tell me I came to the Bible with an “agenda.” I came with anguish. With hunger. With hope. With the stuff that life is made of. And if you think about, if you're honest, that's how *every* spiritual pilgrimage begins, even the biblical ones.

Think of Abraham and Sarah moving across endless sand dunes—and going up, and then back down a mountain with a child destined for sacrifice. Consider Joseph, being thrown from a pampered life into a deep pit and then sold into slavery before rising to power in Egypt. Remember Moses and Miriam leading their people out of Egypt into freedom, into more unknown territory than they can possibly fathom.

Recall Ruth and Naomi, women and widows in a time when it was barely safe to be the first and rarely safe to be the second. Think of David, the shepherd king, runt of the family, anointed to power, fleeing for his life, taking the throne, and then watching his dynasty unravel due to his own tumultuous testosterone.

Consider Mary, transfixed between angelic promises and watching the tortured death of that promised child on a tree. Or Mary Magdalene, the female apostle, claimed by Jesus but envied by others and plagued ever after by rumors of her past. Think of Peter and Paul, these two head-strong but equally awkward leaders of the early church.

None of these folks took their cues solely with the Bible. They began with their lives. Their pain and their joy. Their hope and their fear. They began with their questions. And I began with mine.

*Each journey—theirs, mine and yours—begins in the heart, in the frightfully unpredictable, the ecstatically joyful, the tragically painful lived experience of life.* And in *this* space God ... and God's word is our *companion*. Not as blueprint or map. Not an answer book. And surely not a persistent threat of eternal judgment. Rather a compass, a north star, a whisper of grace.

*My journey begins in the heart.* My moment on the road to Damascus, my moment standing in the wilderness before the burning bush, happened in February 1997. Ten months after Dale's death. Well into my graduate studies, my mind working overtime on moral matters. And soon after starting to teach my own class of students at Notre Dame.

Notre Dame back then was not friendly terrain for LGBT persons. The daily student newspaper carried tirades against homosexuality on a weekly basis. I cringed when I read them. But I was here to get a degree. This wasn't my faith tradition after all. Not really my argument to get into. It wasn't my life on the line.

But then I started taking roll in my classes. And my students ... kids just 18 or 19 years old ... suddenly had faces and names. I never knew any one of them to be LGBT, but my first semester of teaching I had 80 of them, and surely a couple of them matched up with one letter or another—and felt targeted by those weekly tirades. I felt myself move from that occasional cringe to chronic discomfort.

One day in February I read an anonymous lament written by a senior at Notre Dame. He wrote about coming to the University four years ago knowing he was gay, and told how he would graduate in three more months—without having told a single person at school this truth of his life. He described the fear that framed each day lest he be “discovered.” He titled his essay, “Living in fear.”

His words were my burning bush. I could not turn away from them. I had no idea who he was. Clearly not one of my students because I had only freshmen and sophomores. But his pain seared my soul. That night I wept and I wrote into the wee hours of the next day.

I didn't write an essay. I wrote a letter back to him. I titled it “Words offered at the end of the day to an unknown friend living in fear.” I wrote, “I see now that if God is silent in the face of your anguish, it's only because I wouldn't lend God the use of my words. Well here they are.” And I went on to ransack the Bible for images of welcome and comfort. I wrestled with the Word of God the way Jacob wrestled with the angel, not as an enemy or adversary, but determined nonetheless to wrestle ... until I, too, near dawn, received a blessing.

*And I haven't been able to shut up since then.*

### **Opening the Bible with new eyes; finding *our* place in God's story**

A decade and more before I wrote those “Words offered at the end of the day,” in both college and seminary, I had met the Bible with a sharp mind—and with six semesters of New Testament Greek. I had learned a lot. But especially in my graduate school coursework, particularly in seminars on

the Hebrew prophets and the Gospels, I began to suspect that C.S. Lewis was right in describing Aslan, the lion who represents Jesus in the Narnia Chronicles as profoundly good—but *hardly tame*.

In my studies I heard prophetic voices brimful and more with passion for justice. Voices that dared to imagine a God whose commitment to liberation was not only disinterested in fanfare and ceremony but who exploded in anger when religious rituals created the conditions for apathy, abuse, or injustice. Voices who loaned God words to sound alarms in times of complacency and to spark hope in the depths of despair.

I met a Jesus whose parables were intended to disorient those who heard them, precisely so they could hear new things. A man whose healing miracles again and again aimed to restore those marked as outcasts by their infirmity to the community God longs for. And a man whose meals and whose fellowship obliterated the carefully constructed boundaries that sought to preserve a world shaped foremost by power and prejudice.

As a result, in much of my writing I replace the phrase “kingdom of God” for “*kin-dom* of God,” because it's clear that for Jesus God's reign *is the experience of becoming family*—being *kin* to one another

As I wrote more as an Ally for LGBTQ persons, of course I had to deal with the “problem” texts, the six or seven passages that seem at first glance to condemn homosexuality—the “texts of terror,” as they're sometimes called. There are many ways to treat them. Reckoning with the historical and social contexts, and with the linguistic features of them, makes it pretty clear that these passages don't speak to our contemporary experience.

Behind the words of Leviticus lies a history and a culture in which anal rape was a common practice among victorious soldiers, a way of reducing the vanquished army to “women.” The same era saw the use of sex in Temples (including same-sex activity with male prostitutes) as a way to “sell” the efficacy of sacrifices—much the way that alluring women are used to sell everything from cosmetics and clothing to beer and cars in ads today; the promise of sex is still actively used today, where our Temple is the marketplace. In an era deeply stamped by patriarchy and with far fewer sexual mores than we have today, it just happened to be alluring men who did most of the selling.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a story of territorial rape; about using sex as an instrument of terror to painfully inscribe a pecking order in someone else's flesh. It happens on prison blocks today as well. In these two cities, identified by the prophets as places of rampant injustice and inexcusable disregard for the vulnerable ones in their midst, the threats made against Lot's guests simply exemplify a group of people that has adopted terror as a way of life.

Paul's words about same-sex activity are also aimed elsewhere than today. While same-sex activity did happen in his world, it occurred almost entirely in the practice of pederasty, where an adult man—usually married—adopted a prepubescent boy as a sort of sex toy. This was a relationship with clear boundaries determined mostly by patriarchy. Given the age difference—the cultural norms said that the moment the boy grew facial hair or pubic hair, in other words, at the onset of adolescence, the relationship needed to end—this wasn't even really same-sex activity. It was a strange mix of erotic behavior linked to power, status, and gender roles. And it clearly conflicted with Paul's sense of baptismal equality in the church.

None of these texts have anything to say about committed and caring same-sex relationships. The behaviors at issue in all of these texts are problematic because of HOW sex is being used, NOT because of who is having sex. They “happen” to involve same-sex persons because in our deeply patriarchal past the sex of male priests was most highly honored because they were male, and the sex involved in rape or pederasty was male-to-male precisely because of the patriarchal power relations that were being inscribed or abused.

Much as we might wish that the biblical had anticipated every question our world would present to us, they concerned themselves with the world they knew. And unless we are willing to do the homework to enter that world, it becomes a fool's errand to think we can go to a specific text to answer a question never put to the original author.

So sometimes, because those Christians who oppose a full welcome and affirmation of LGBTQ persons say that people like me have chosen not to take the Bible seriously, I make the slightly provocative claim that it's the people who want to read these passages literally who haven't even begun to take the Bible seriously. It's simply far too complicated a text to presume that it speaks directly to issues today. I don't say that to belittle it. I say it to show real reverence to it: real respect for the actual authors in their actual history and the actual God who moved their hearts so long ago.

But another way I've come to meet these texts is simply with the life of Jesus. Christians have called Jesus the Incarnate Word of God at least as long ago as John's Gospel, likely before the year 100. And in the life lived by Jesus we see the written text repeatedly re-framed, not to relativize it and not to dismiss it, but to refocus it on the same passion that the prophets showed: mercy and justice, marked by a large measure of gracious welcome. Finally, Jesus' life of radical, surprising, and unconditional welcome is *the Text that claims our attention, our loyalty, and our hearts.*

Reading the biblical story in light of *this Text, this life*, and with fresh attention to welcome and surprise I began to see themes that were there all along that I never really noticed before.

Try this tonight if the sky is clear when you leave. Find the part of the sky where the stars that comprise the Big Dipper lie. And then try to look at the stars and find a pattern in them other than the Big Dipper. We know it's just a human-imposed pattern, but we have been taught to see it—and only it—for so long, that our eyes are virtually unable to see anything else in that spot in the sky.

All my life no one had ever told me that there were dots in the biblical narrative that revealed the pattern of a scandalously welcoming God. But my questions, my hunger, my anguish, and my learning, let me finally see this pattern that had been there all along.

Listen to this rushing wind of images:

Abraham and Sara, a couple of nomads—and nobodies because they had neither land nor children—become the parents of a nation.

Isaac, their child of promise and laughter, nearly gets sacrificed in a misguided attempt by Abraham to prove his faithfulness to God, but instead walks down the mountain alongside his father, finally known as the gift he was all along.

Jacob, Joseph, and David—all sons second born or lower in a society where first-born sons got everything—become the hope of their people. Indeed, when Samuel comes to anoint David to be king of Israel, his father, Jesse, first summons every elder brother, certain that each in turn must be the one chosen by God. Only when pressed by Samuel, does Jesse send someone to get the runt of the family, whose hair receives Samuel's oil and whose heart becomes the biblical standard of a king's passion for God.

Rebekah, a woman with no voice in her culture, resets the course of history by helping Jacob gain an inheritance that seemed destined for Esau.

The Exodus is the great tale of liberation and love. In this story a whole people of nobodies—slaves for whom “tomorrow” does not even really exist ... except as the continuation of a miserable “today”—*a whole people of nobodies* is welcomed by God in into freedom and community beyond their dreams.

Naomi, despite being a woman and a widow, manages to secure safety and security not only for herself but for her foreign-born daughter-in-law as well.

Ruth, this daughter-in-law, a Moabite no less, member of an entire people *damned* in the Bible—becomes not only one of the greatest biblical model of faithfulness, but also the great grandmother of King David. *She*

*brings the bloodline of people condemned in the Bible into the royal lineage that runs through David and on down to Jesus.*

Jonah, in a story that has nothing to do with the size of the fish's belly and everything to do with the size of God's love, discovers that his God loves even his enemies. Indeed, Jonah explains to God that the whole reason he refused to go to Ninevah in the first place was because he was worried that the God he *knew* to be "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" would suddenly be these things to *those* people—and he wanted to keep that God all to himself and to his kind.

Isaiah declares that eunuchs—the social-sexual freaks of his days, the persons whose anatomy whether by birth or by violence left them marginalized, exploited, or altogether outcast—*eunuchs* had found God's favor. And he goes on to declare (as we heard in this morning's chapel reading) that the God of Israel is that God whose *very goal* is to gather outcasts, and whose gathering is far from complete.

The story of Jesus in the Gospels is like these Hebrew Bible examples on steroids. Almost every category of questionable character or status makes an appearance in this grand narrative of welcome. We see shepherds, wizards, barren women, bleeding women, lepers, demoniacs, all manner of persons with disabilities, tax collectors, revolutionaries, and more. *The man is a magnet for every imaginable outcast person.*

Let me lift up just one: Samaritans. They make three significant cameo appearances in the gospel accounts.

When Jesus encounters a woman at the well and asks for a drink she reacts with surprise, that this Jewish prophet would stoop so low as to seek water from a Samaritan. But a few verses later she becomes one of the first "apostles" of Jesus, sharing the good news of her experience at the well with her fellow villagers.

When Jesus heals ten lepers, nine – all Jews – are so happy to be cleansed of the disease that they go their own ways never returning to praise God or thank Jesus. Only one – a Samaritan returns to do so.

And when Jesus tells the parable about the injured traveler lying alongside the road, he describes how both the priest and Levite pass by on the other side. Their official duties in the Temple forbid them to come in contact with anyone near death. So while their actions strike us as callous, they would explain they are only following the orders of their occupation. But someone needs to aid the traveler, and the Samaritan – never named in the parable as the "Good Samaritan" but known almost universally by that phrase – comes along and saves the day.

Well, what's at stake in these Samaritan sightings? Most of us have no idea, but in Jesus' day these encounters were scandalous beyond measure ... the result of animosity several centuries old.

Twice in Israel's early history, great empires swept in and conquered them. In the eighth century before Jesus the northern tribes were scattered by Assyria, eventually lost to history, becoming in fact "the lost tribes of Israel." Later on, in the sixth century before Jesus, the Southern tribe of Judah was carried off into Exile. Both times the Bible says that "the poorest of the poor" were left behind. There were some Jews these superpowers didn't bother scatter or deport. They were too poor, too illiterate, too unskilled, too worthless to worry about. Left behind, they lived up in the hill country of Israel known as Samaria. Over the years they intermarried with refugees from other nations, but they persevered in worshipping the God who had liberated and loved them generations before.

Decades later, when their kinfolk returned from Exile to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, the descendants of these poorest Jews from the hill country came down, understandably overjoyed to greet their once lost family and to help them reclaim the land and rebuild the Temple. They were scorned as half-breeds. They were told to get lost. They were regarded as illegitimate Jews—bastards, really—*on account of sleeping with the wrong type of people.*

As the family feud lasted over the centuries, these folks were denied the name "Jew" and were instead called Samaritans. The Jews considered Samaritans worse than Gentiles (who were at least "honestly" non-Jewish); see, Samaritans claimed to be Jews, but the "real" Jews knew better. In Jesus' day, Samaritans remained, without question, the single most despised category of people you could mention. And yet this outcast Samaritan man is the person Jesus chooses to portray as imaging the activity of God in the world.

So, in case you didn't catch the point about Jesus' ministry taking the promise of God's faithfulness and the wideness of God's welcome—already stretched in the Hebrew Scriptures—and stretching it yet further in his day ... In case you missed the parts where shepherds, wizards, barren women, bleeding women, lepers, demoniacs, all manner of persons with disabilities, tax collectors, revolutionaries, and more got included in the story ... Well, the Samaritan sightings come along like an italicized, underlined, bold print, brightly colored bit of text that says, ***whoever the hell you are, you're welcome alongside Jesus.***

See, this isn't just a minor theme hiding in the background. I've given you a handful of images and examples. But I could give a dozen more. *This is THE central theme of the biblical story.* It's called "grace," but "grace" is just an

abstract theological word that doesn't mean much of anything until you put flesh on it. Until you clothe it with ethnicity and skin tone, with class and power, with gender and sexuality. To say that God deals in grace—in radical, absolute, unexpected, unconditional, and sometimes even unsettling welcome—that doesn't mean jack shit until it means precisely “*the people not like us.*”

### Closing words

Still, perhaps not surprisingly, and maybe especially as we gather on National Coming Out Day, those of us who are straight are sometimes tempted to begrudge all the fuss made about a “special” welcome to “those LGBTQ people.” If we decide to welcome them, fine. But why make such a big deal out of it?

Well, the tale of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 helps put our reaction in perspective. You may recall, Peter has a rooftop vision in which God invites him to enjoy a feast of forbidden foods spread out on a blanket. He declines to eat anything, telling God he's never eaten anything off the ritually impure menu. God responds by declaring, “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.” But Peter doesn't understand at first that God's not talking about food; God's talking about *folks* that are viewed as ritually unclean. Only a little later, when he receives a request to go preach to Cornelius, a Gentile, and thus ritually unclean, does he realize that his vision was really about regarding these unexpected people as clean.

So he accepts the invitation, goes to Cornelius' home and preaches to Cornelius and his entire household—all of them Gentiles, all of the men uncircumcised, all of the women and children ritually unclean in other ways. Every one of them falls outside the bounds of God's welcome. But before Peter even finishes his message, the Spirit claims all these foreigners—exactly as they are (unclean by human standards, unclean even by biblical standards, but chosen as clean by a welcoming God), and they are carried away in a moment of holy ecstasy. Although it will be a couple decades before the rest of the church figures it out, in that moment Peter at least connects the dots and exclaims out loud “How can we not welcome fully in our churches those whom God has so clearly and fully welcomed already?”

But of course, the welcome to Gentiles back then is not exactly analogous to welcoming LGBTQ persons. Though I would argue it is pretty damn close when you get right down it. But this text in Acts 10 does relate *even more closely* to another contemporary group of people: *all the rest of us.*

Acts, chapter 10—in fact, the entire book of Acts, and much of Paul's writings, might be more aptly titled for us today, “Gentiles R Us.” Because then maybe we'd remember that once upon a time, 2000 years ago, despite way more than a small handful of texts that specifically condemned almost

everyone in this room simply for being Gentiles, *we—the distant but DNA-determined members of Cornelius' household—we were the ones offered an entirely unexpected welcome, first by God and then (only after a decade or more of argument) by God's church.*

That's why I titled my talk “Paying it Forward.” Years ago, driven by questions, by friendships, by hunger, by anguish, I went looking for a God who welcomes others. And here is the surprise: *I discovered as well a God who welcomes me.* The story of God's surprising welcome is *our* story. Thus, to pay it forward? *How dare we not!* Welcome is *the* theme of the biblical tale from first to last! *All manner of outsiders are brought in. Again and again and again and again—including in Acts 10: us.* The Bible carries in its narrative the tune of a welcoming God, and it is time for us to see and to hear, to feel the pounding rhythm of a welcome that is still widening today.

In some ways the wonder of that welcome is most fresh today for some of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters—although for others this welcome is as yet buried beneath bullying or other experiences of bias and judgment. But in the words and experience of those LGBTQ persons who right now have come to know the gracious and astonishing welcome of God, if we listen—even in the fearful hope and the tearful joy that mark many of their Coming Out Stories—we might remember that Grace was once breathtakingly fresh for us as well. Worth making a big deal about it.

“Paying it Forward” means remembering the grace of a welcome that always comes to each of us as quite a surprise, and without condition. And in this remembering, how can we not be moved by joy to extend that welcome on to others today? I trust that in time we will. And I pray that the time will be soon. And I hope that for some of you tonight, the moment will be now.

Thank you.

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