

Sunday, June 30, 2019

Proper 8C

1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21 - Galatians 5:1,13-25 - Luke 9:51-62

The Very Rev. Tracey Lind

The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet



This week marks the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. On June 28, 1969 police raided the Stonewall Inn, a Greenwich Village gay bar. Such raids were fairly common. Folks would run or get arrested (or both), and life would go on. But on that memorable night, patrons, led by a group of trans women of color, didn't run, and instead, resisted arrest.

Over the last half-century, the LGBTQ community has come out, stood up, held hands, and followed the way of freedom. In the words of this morning's gospel, it has been a long and costly journey as we set our faces toward Jerusalem. Like Jesus and those first disciples, many of us bid farewell to our homes, families, jobs, churches and reputations.

Coming out 45 years ago, I vividly recall the first time I told someone I was gay, as well as the first time I walked into a gay bar, marched in a Pride Parade, and visited Provincetown. Contemplating the recent election of two openly gay bishops, a lot has changed since I came out in the ordination process, made public witness during the 1995 Episcopal Church heresy trial, was installed as the first lesbian cathedral dean, or stood for episcopal election. When I read wedding announcements in the *Sunday Times*, I remember lobbying for marriage equality and weeping when the Supreme Court rendered its decision on same sex marriage. And watching the Democratic debates this past week, I marveled at the sight of a young, married, gay, Episcopalian from Indiana running for president of the United States.

Reflecting on a liberation movement birthed in bars, beaches, basements and bedrooms, I can see the long arc of justice in the making. The LGBTQ story is a great example of struggle, acceptance, inclusion and equality grounded in what the apostle Paul outlines in his letter to the Galatians as "the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Gal 5.22)

In this morning's gospel reading, Jesus teaches us about a way of life that is all-too-familiar to the LGBTQ community. When refused hospitality by a Samaritan village, two of his disciples asked: "Lord, do you want us to call a bolt of lightning down out of the sky and incinerate them?"¹ Jesus responded: "Of course not. Let's just move on." The gay community knows all-too-well what it means to kick off the dust of rejection and keep walking.

On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus encountered three types of people. And to each, he explained a different cost of freedom in Christ.

To the one who said, "I will follow you wherever you go," Jesus reminded him that he would face a life of insecurity. The LGBTQ community knows what it's like to lose jobs, homes, families, friends, and even their lives because of their sexuality and gender identity.

To the one who said, “Let me first bury my father,” Jesus’ response seems curt and insensitive. Yet, the gay community knows what it’s like to not be welcome at family funerals. And not only that, but we know what it’s like to bury each other when our families have rejected us.

To the one who said, “I will follow you, but first excuse me while I get things straightened out at home,” Jesus said, “Don’t look back. Carpe Diem.” As most LGBTQ folks know, once you’ve opened the closet door, it’s really hard to close it again.

To everyone who wants to follow Jesus, our Lord demands total and complete commitment to a radical way of life which actually runs counter to the definition of “family values” that the religious community has proclaimed in the name of Christ. Jesus was talking about a new configuration of family and community, one that the LGBTQ community deeply understands.

As I reflected upon this week’s lectionary and the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall, I was reminded of John Fortunato’s *Embracing the Journey*.¹ This is intimate, courageous and hopeful book - written in 1982 by a gay, Episcopal, psychotherapist - is an early treatise on holding sexual identity and Christian faith together. It wasn’t easy back then, and the author took a lot of heat from the church, his professional colleagues, and the gay community.

Recalling one night during a particularly challenging time, Fortunato had a conversation with God. Imagining that God was sitting on the couch right in front of him, Fortunato spoke:

“You know, sometimes I think they’re right, that being gay and loving a man is wrong.”

God smiled and said quietly, “How can love be wrong? It all comes from me.”

[But Fortunato needed more.] “Sometimes, I just want to bury that part of me.” [he] said, “just pretend that it isn’t real.”

“But I made you whole,” God replied. “You are one as I am one. I made you in my image...You’re my son...Nothing can separate you from my love...”

“What do I do with all this?” [Fortunato] asked..“What do I do with *them*?”

And in the same calm voice, God said, “I’ve given you gifts. Share them. I’ve given you light. Brighten the world. I empower you with my love. Love them.”

“Love them anyway?” [he] moaned. “But how?”

“You begin by just being who you are.”

Is that all, [he] asked fearfully.

“No, you must also speak your pain and affirm the wholeness I’ve made you to be when they assail it. You must protest when you are treated as less than a child of mine.”

“Is there more?” [he] asked.

“Yes,” God said gently, “And this is the hardest part of all. You must go out and teach them. Help them to know of their dependence on me for all that they really are, and of their helplessness without. Teach them that their ways are not my ways, and that the world of their imagining is not the world I have made. Help them to see that all creation is one as I am one, and that all I create I redeem. And assure them by word and work and example that my love is boundless, and that I am with them always.”

“You know they won’t listen to me, [Fortunato] said with resignation. “They’ll despise me, They’ll call me a heretic and laugh me to scorn. They’ll persecute and torment me. They’ll try to destroy me. You know they will, don’t you.”

...And God said softly, “O, yes, I know. How well I know.”

If that’s not the way of Jesus, I don’t know what is.

When I was younger, I had a vision that everybody who was lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered would turn purple at the same time. Then my vision grew. I envisioned that everybody who had a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered spouse, parent, or child would turn purple. I envisioned that everybody who had a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered doctor, dentist, pharmacist, lawyer, accountant, realtor, insurance agent, teacher, hairdresser, legislator, rabbi or minister would turn purple. And I envisioned that everybody who had a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered relative, friend, neighbor, student, employee, or employer would turn purple. By the time I was finished, the world was a beautiful tapestry of richly woven purple; and the conversation had changed, the hearts of the people had changed, and the policies of our governments had changed.

As I matured, I came to understand that it wasn’t going to happen that way. God doesn’t do our liberation work for us. We had to turn ourselves purple. We had to change the conversation, win the hearts of the people, and secure our rightful place in family, church and society one-step-at-a-time by being open and true to whom we are. And God would be with us in the trenches. That is the promise of salvation.

Coming out has been the LGBTQ community's way of turning ourselves purple. Yes, the LGBTQ community has come a long way over the past fifty years. Some would say that we've become too established, comfortable, and even hetero-normative. Personally, I don't agree with this perspective. However, as tempting as it may be, we cannot rest on our laurels, enjoy our victories, and ignore the pain and injustice faced by others.

As writer, performance artist and gender theorist Kate Bornstein observed in this week's *New Yorker*: "A similar moment happened in Weimar Germany in the thirties...Gender and sexuality exploded. The arts were amazing. And fascism was on the rise. And then fascism won."³

If we don't open our eyes to the threat of fascism on the rise today, then we *all* will be in trouble. If Jesus were standing in this pulpit, I think he would ask: Who are the outcasts and oppressed among us today, and what are we doing to make them feel welcome and safe, included and accepted?

From the Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."⁴

Today, let us give thanks for those who, in every generation, stand up and walk together in the face of oppression and in the name of love with their faces toward Jerusalem. And, let us pledge to go forth from this place and continue the work of proclaiming God's justice, love and mercy for all God's people.

Endnotes

1. Gospel quotations are taken from *The Message*, a translation by Eugene Peterson.
2. John Forunato, *Embracing the Journey: Healing Journeys of Gay Christians*. New York, HarperSanFrancisco, 1982. The excerpt, which has been adapted for preaching, can be found on pages 15-16 of the paperback version.
3. Masha Green, "Coming Out and Rising Up in the Fifty Years after Stonewall," *The New Yorker*, June 28, 2019.
4. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from the Birmingham Jail."

Photo Credit

Opening Ceremony, Gay Games 2014 - Cleveland, Ohio - Tracey Lind