

Coming Out As Sacrament

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*Coming out serves as a universal experience, thus a sacrament in which we are all welcome to participate. Our own coming out invites others to share their secret selves, to risk intimate disclosure. Historically, many individuals and groups have come out of hiding or anonymity to declare their unique identities, understandings, beliefs, and visions. —Chris Glaser, *Coming Out As Sacrament**

Ancient Witness: John 11:17, 43-44

It was the apostle Paul who said that the letter of the law (the Torah)—the written word—kills, but the spirit gives life. Because the written word can be twisted and manipulated to serve self-interest, to dominate, subjugate, and violate others, and to mask privilege and entitlement. But the spirit cannot be caged and calls for relationships that are loving, just and fair—life-giving.

For example, with slavery, the written word was used to justify the abuse and torture of men and women, to separate children from their parents and to dehumanize others with unspeakable cruelty. They quoted chapter and verse. But this was not Christian, not true religion. It was a distortion, fake, counterfeit, and imposter religion. The slave-holder Christianity was merely the evil of White supremacy in sheep's clothing.

And with sexism, the written word was used to justify the subservience and inequality of women. They quoted chapter and verse. But this was merely patriarchy—the evil of male dominance—in sheep's clothing.

You know, Jesus himself had his own run-ins with those Bible-thumpers, those who opposed his agenda and who quoted chapter and verse. And he called them hypocrites and pretenders. They twisted and manipulated the written words to suit themselves. Jesus referred to them as a bunch of snakes! Because they weren't interested in being spiritually transformed, in being set free. Instead, they were only interested in maintaining their power, privilege and prestige at the expense of others. They manipulated the written words and, according to Jesus, they missed the big things: justice, mercy and faithfulness. They missed this life-giving spirit behind the words.

And so we also see today, with regard to our gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and non-binary siblings, how the written word is manipulated and twisted to demean and deny them the same basic rights and human dignity as others. They throw chapter and verse, like stones. But there is nothing Christian about this. It is merely the evil of homophobia and transphobia in sheep's clothing.

And it seems to me that the church needs to repent for the ways it has promoted fear, hatred and violence, for violating the life-giving spirit that calls us to relate with love, justice and fairness, for hurting and killing and not giving life.

Like many, many others, including some of you here, I have been involved in this struggle for LGBTQ equality for over three decades. And over 20 years ago I found myself dealing with newspaper reporters, T.V. cameras and radio shows during my celebrated trial in the courts of the

Presbyterian Church, eventually losing my job, my standing and my church over this issue. It made the national news, and the story was picked up by the Associated Press, New York Times, and The Advocate, who did a large piece on me. And because of this, people contacted me from all over the country, overwhelmingly supportive and grateful. It was then that I received a letter from a friend that I hadn't seen for over 25 years.

Mark was my best friend in high school. We played in the Youth Symphony together and were on the debate team together. We both did well academically, taking college courses our junior and senior years. But Mark was absolutely brilliant—getting a perfect score on his SAT's. I was a slacker in comparison, while he got a full scholarship and graduated from Princeton in three years and then Columbia Law. And we just lost contact – went our separate ways.

In our senior year Mark came out to me and his parents. I remember how his parents went crazy and sent him to a therapist to “fix” him. Mark, who had hopes of being president one day – a goal that was, in his case, realistic – saw all of those dreams of political ambition dashed. For in the 1970's being gay meant the end of one's political career. I remember the brief awkwardness of Mark's physical attraction to me, of my inability to return those same feelings, and us emerging still the best of friends. And now what I remember is the incredible risk he took to come out to me. What if I had turned on him? Laughed at him? Rejected him? I try to imagine what this might have felt like, but cannot.

And so I get this letter 20 years ago that starts out, “Hello, old friend.” He tells me that he's single and living with AIDS out East. He tells me about his life and hopes that life is good for me. He wrote,

I saw your wife with you in a picture accompanying the article. I hope your family is well.

Steve, it means so much to gay people when righteous straights stand up for us and with us. A loving “thank-you” from me and thousands of others who will never write you but read about you.

Love, Mark

Years ago an article that appeared in *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* by Tim McFeely, entitled “Coming Out As Spiritual Revelation.” He wrote about how coming out is an act of love. Not content to interact with others in a superficial way any longer, the gay, trans or non-binary person reaches out to another person and opens up her or his soul, not as an act of defiance, but of love. It is an act of risk, vulnerability and trust. McFeely wrote:

Given time, most family and friends come to see our coming out as a testament to our trust and love for them

Again and again I have seen gay and queer people, previously alienated from their parents as a result of the fear and deception of the closet, forge an unusual closeness once that closet door has been opened.

Many LGBTQ people have taught me so much about what it means to be a Christian. I have, and continue to be, so blessed. In spite of tremendous risk, in the face of injustice, I have seen people struggle to be themselves and demonstrate remarkable courage to become vulnerable to others. Many gay and queer folks lost their jobs and livelihoods and faced physical violence back then. And

sadly, this still happens today.

And we see countless anti-trans bills introduced in many states, including Ohio. We see today, grown men dressed up like soldiers, carrying assault weapons to drag readings at libraries and to pride events—all designed to bully and intimidate people back into the closet, hidden from view.

In his book, *Coming Out As Sacrament*, Chris Glaser, who as a gay man was unable to serve as a minister in the Presbyterian Church, talked about the unique gifts that gay people have to offer the church, if only the church would be wise enough to accept them. He wrote,

Our own coming out invites others to share their secret selves, to risk intimate disclosure.

I think of it this way. You know, we celebrate communion, but the church often doesn't do a great job of encouraging communion. The church is often content with a pale imitation. Because to commune with someone is to be in an intimate relationship. It is when we offer our true selves to each other. Communion means coming out to each other, and this is why LGBTQ people can help the church move toward deeper and deeper levels of communion. We straight, cis folks can learn a lot about what it takes to experience communion if we are willing to listen.

Another way that I think of this is that gay, trans and non-binary people have helped me understand better about living lives of integrity, honesty and authenticity. God calls all of us to live lives in which our inward state matches our outward actions.

While many of us straight persons can avoid grappling with integrity, this is an issue with which queer persons are confronted from day one. And so they help me continue to learn about the struggle to be authentic, a basic question of faith.

It seems to me that God calls all of us to live lives in which our inward state matches our outward actions. This reminds me of something that the great civil rights pioneer, Rosa Parks, once said:

I will no longer act on the outside in way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be.

I want to underscore an important point that Glaser makes in a footnote in his book. In talking about the destructiveness of the closet he wants to make sure he is not misunderstood as blaming the victim:

I understand that the closet may be, depending on circumstance or stage of development, a necessary, healthy, and even a moral choice for some at various points in time. But I believe it has implications for the person's overall health and moral well-being. The closet essentially wounds its occupant

I also believe that coming out may be something one chooses with some and not with others

McFeely makes a similar point. He wrote,

Coming out does not necessarily result in spiritual happiness, but for those who are

searching for spiritual insight, coming out is a sine qua non of the quest

A successful spiritual search is unattainable from a closeted environment.

As a straight, cis man, as a minister, I read McFeely's comments and realize that my own spiritual search depends upon me coming out of my own kind of closet. Again, this is a blessing I've received from LGBTQ people.

William Sloane Coffin once was talking about how we are all unique and diverse, but that no human being's identity is exhausted by one's race, gender identity or sexual orientation. He said,

Human beings are fully human only when they find the universal in the particular, when they recognize that all people have more in common than they have in conflict.

So there are some things about being gay that I will never understand. The closet is a gay experience, but it is also a human experience. It is particular, but it is also universal. We are taught that honesty is a virtue and so experience shame and guilt when we withhold essential parts of ourselves. Any closet makes a person feel dishonest, even when there is absolutely nothing about which to be ashamed. Shame is internalized and the person feels there is "something to hide." Coming out is something that can speak to us all, if we let it. As McFeely says,

We never stop coming out; and the unquenchable thirst for truth is itself the core of our spirituality

Coming out ends the concealment, ameliorates the fear, and starts a process of shrinking the cancer of shame.

Actually, if the church would take a close look at its own history, it is full of examples of groups and individuals who came out in a broad, universal sense. These were people who showed great courage and conviction in sharing their unique and deeply held truths in the face of intimidation and power.

And finally, coming out can lead us to accept, without shame, those things in us about which we are not proud, too. There's a saying in the recovering community: "We are only as sick as our secrets." In other words, when we are not real to others, it is very hard to be real and authentic to ourselves. And we stop growing, emotionally and spiritually.

Coming out is about embracing our *whole selves*. This doesn't mean that we present an edited, false view of ourselves. If coming out means that we need to be perfect, no one would do it. It is an unreasonable requirement. It is about living with greater transparency, and with less shame and guilt. It is a spiritual path toward integrity and healing.

Coming out, for me, is akin to Jesus' image of abundant life, a life that is fearless, free and joyful. A raised up, a resurrected life. A life that Jesus wished for all people to have. A life desiring full and deep communion with all.

When I think of Jesus, there was someone who had come out fully – in the universal human sense – about who he was, what he believed – at great personal risk. I am amazed and inspired by people who do this.

And so as we begin Pride Week, I find this story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead to be very appropriate. The wisdom reflected in Jesus calls us all out of our tombs of fear to be ourselves without shame or guilt. To an awareness that God's love is with us no matter what, and that this love can give us the strength to move mountains. As with Lazarus, he yells, "Come Out!" to a life of openness and sunlight, to take off the death cloth that binds us, to be free, to be raised up!

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)