

Proper 6A 2020 Sermon

Matthew 9:35-36

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Most of you know that it is my custom to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with my biological family in the Chicago area. One of those holidays proved to be the beginning of a significant transformation in my perspective and understanding. It was November, 2014, and I was seated with my family around the table for Thanksgiving dinner. My dad and my three brothers and their wives were there, along with some of my brothers' children – my nieces and nephews. The oldest of these, my niece Jessica, who is my goddaughter and whom I love dearly, was visiting from Arizona with her partner, with whom she had been living for 13 years.

Jessica had been a primary school teacher, but had recently decided on a career change: she had gone back to school and was studying to be an occupational therapist. But going back to school not only meant that she no longer had an income, it also meant that she had tuition to pay; and it also meant that she would no longer have the benefit of the health insurance that she had through her previous school-teaching job. Now, most married persons in such situations are able to be included under their spouse's health insurance; but Jessica didn't have that option, since *her* partner was of the same sex, and for most of the 13 years they had lived together in Arizona, same-sex marriage had been illegal. But recently, that had changed. In both Arizona and in Illinois, same-sex marriage had become legal.

Well, as I said, we were all seated at the Thanksgiving dinner table engaged in conversation, which, as always, included a lot of laughter, when out of the blue, Jessica asked me, "Uncle Mark, would you marry Tonya and me? Since you're my godfather, it would be very special to me and to Tonya."

To say that I was caught off-guard would be an understatement. First of all, I wasn't really sure how I *felt* about same-sex marriage. Historically, I had held a somewhat conservative perspective on such things, although observing Jess and Tonya's committed, faithful relationship over the past 13 years, and coming to love and respect Tonya, and knowing that it wasn't easy living as a same-sex couple in the largely conservative state of Arizona, I had ambivalent, conflicted feelings. On the one hand, I was greatly honored and touched that Jess and Tonya would ask me to officiate at their wedding; on the other hand, I wasn't settled in myself regarding the issue of same-sex marriage.

And so, I stalled.

I told them, truthfully, that I would have to ask permission from my Bishop and from the Bishop of the Diocese of Chicago, since they wanted to be married in the Chicago area. After I spoke with these two bishops, I would get back to them. There was time, since they were planning for a summer wedding, and it was November.

I decided that, before I approached either bishop, I would have to determine within my own self how I really felt about the issue of same-sex marriage. I ordered some audiobooks by young, evangelical authors who had struggled with their own sexual orientation within their own families and within their churches – families and churches which rejected homosexuality as sinful and “against Scripture.”¹ These young, gay Christians had prayed their hearts out that God take away the feelings of attraction that they had towards members of their own sex. They had gone through “conversion therapy,” which involved psychotherapists telling them that they must have had some bad experience in their childhood which made them have these feelings. Conversion therapy also involved giving young gay men Playboy magazines, to try to stir their attraction toward women. None of it worked. Some of these young Christian men and women, who were deeply faithful to their church and loved the people in their congregation, were thrown out of their church. Some were thrown out of their houses by their parents. These were not “bad” churches or “bad” parents; on the contrary: they were loving churches and loving parents. But they simply could not accept homosexuality; so these young people would have to leave.

Listening to those authors (and the young people on the video, *Through My Eyes*) tell their stories tore my heart out. I had no idea what young, Christian gay men and young, Christian lesbian women were going through. The self-loathing: seeing themselves as irredeemably sinful and dirty. Having others whom they loved see them that way, also. Thinking that they were certainly going to hell. *Wanting* to change, *praying* to change, going through conversion therapy – often more than once – but with no success. I came away from listening to those authors with the realization that what these young people said was undoubtedly true: namely, that they didn’t **choose** to be this way. Who ever **would**, if it meant being thrown out of your church and your family? If it meant loathing yourself? *Nobody* would choose that.

And then I got to thinking about Jess and Tonya. It’s hard enough for marriages between men and women to survive in this day and age, without the *added* stress of navigating life when a significant portion of the culture sees your loving, committed relationship to your partner as deviant or sinful. I began to see that the loving commitment between Jess and Tonya had to be even stronger than that between heterosexual couples, in order to survive this added stress.

And then I began to see that there is a strong, **institutional** bias against LGBT people within certain denominations and organizations of the Christian Church,

which has spilled over, in some areas of our country, into politics. Just this past week, a news article reported that a Republican congressman from Virginia officiated at a same-sex wedding, and now he is getting challenged in the Republican primary by a born-again evangelical Christian and former Liberty University athletics director. [update: the congressman lost the primary to the former Liberty University athletics director²] Three years ago, Eugene Peterson, the author of the *Message* translation of the Bible (which, as you have heard me say, I believe to be inspired), was asked in an interview whether he would perform a gay marriage if he were still pastoring today and an LGBT couple asked him. Peterson replied, “Yes.” “The condemnations from conservatives were swift. LifeWay, America's largest Christian book chain, threatened to ban his books if he didn’t affirm a traditional view of marriage.”³ Some questioned whether Peterson had become senile in his old age. The heat rose so quickly that within two days, Peterson retracted his remarks, saying that, while a same-sex couple would be welcome in his church, were he pastoring today, he would *not* perform a same-sex wedding “out of respect to the congregation, the larger church body, and the historic biblical Christian view and teaching.”

A few years before that, in 2014, World Vision, the widely-respected Evangelical Christian humanitarian aid and development organization, stated it would allow the hiring of avowed Christians who had been legally married to someone of the same sex. (World Vision has over 40,000 employees.) World Vision U.S. president Richard Stearns explained the organization was not *endorsing* gay marriage. Instead, gay marriage would join a series of issues — like divorce, remarriage, baptism, female priests — that many Christian churches disagree on.

While *many* Christians applauded this move by World Vision, it drew widespread condemnation from more conservative Christians. A professor at a conservative Evangelical seminary said that the new hiring policy was “a betrayal of the nature of the Christian community.” A Southern Baptist leader said, “At stake is the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Franklin Graham said, “It’s obvious that World Vision does not believe in the Bible.” Within little more than a day, World Vision lost between 3,000 and 3,500 sponsors for needy children across the globe as evangelical groups across the country called for a boycott...” Within 2 days, the World Vision Board of Directors reversed their decision on hiring LGBT Christian employees.⁴

My friends, I tell this story about how my perspective on LGBT matters has changed for this reason: it took knowing and loving someone dearly, and then trying to immerse myself in that person’s world, before my perspective began to change. The “gay and lesbian issue” was not an “issue” at all: it was people whom I knew and loved and respected.

The same thing has happened to me when comes to the “issue” of homeless people. It’s not an “issue” at all: it is people, many of whom I have come to know and admire and respect. During most of my ministry, I saw people who

walked into my office asking for help as a nuisance. I was a busy man; I didn't have time for them! I'd usually tell the church secretary to send them away, saying I didn't have any money to give. Or perhaps I would hurriedly write a check and give to them, just to get them out the door. But over the past dozen or so years, I've actually been listening to the teachings of Jesus, and taking them to heart. Now, when someone comes to the door, I ask them if they'd like a cup of coffee, invite them into my office, and sit down and ask, "What's going on in your life?" I may or may not have any money in my discretionary fund; it doesn't matter. I listen, and they know I am listening. So often, that's all that people really long for: someone to listen. A homeless person once told me, "The worst thing about being homeless is that you know that wherever you go, they don't want you there."

I listened to another book on tape about Alan Graham and his ministry to the homeless in Austin, Texas, first in handing out sandwiches, and then, as he got to know these people better, inviting them into his home, and eventually spearheading a tiny home village in Austin called "Community First," which now covers 51 acres and offers over 500 permanent homes. Again, the stories Alan Graham told broke my heart.⁵ I continue to be amazed how people who had *none* of the advantages I had growing up can still live lives of dignity and worth. I see them at Laundry Love, as well as in my office. I know some of their names. The homeless "issue" is not an "issue" at all; its people.

I also listened to a book by Fr. Greg Boyle titled, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, a book recollecting his over 20 years working with gangs in the barrios of Los Angeles. Again, hearing about these gang members, whom Fr. Boyle loves and knows by name, humanized them for me; and the stories of their fears and desperation tore my heart out.

Shane Claiborne, leader of the *Red-Letter Christian* movement and the New Monasticism, wrote, "The tragedy in the Church today is not that rich folks don't *care* about poor folks, but that rich folks don't *know* poor folks... We're never going to have a church of people who care about the poor unless there are leaders who *know* the poor."⁶

Which brings me to the "issue" of the day: how blacks in this country face a very different world when they walk out the door in the morning than you or I do. It's taken me a long time to even begin to hear this and even start to have my eyes opened to the implicit bias and white privilege which pervades our society, of which I am a part. I had always been one of those who said, "Me? I'm not racist!" When I would go to Episcopal Church events and there was a mandated "anti-racism training," I would seethe inside. How dare they assume that I'm racist! Which only made me more defensive, and closed me to any message that I might have needed to hear.

The truth is, if I'm honest, I've never known a black person – really known them. In my high school of 3,600 people, I don't think there was a single black person. I think there were a few black students at college, but I never knew any of them – even though my college was half the size of my high school. When I was probably in Jr. High School, a couple joined our church. She was white; he was black – *very* black, and big, and burly. I remember only that I was afraid of him – for what reason, I don't know. I certainly never spoke to him.

Now, I have been listening to our own Bishop and her experiences as a black woman. She has been called the “N-word.” When she saw the video of George Floyd pinned under the knee of that white Minneapolis policeman, all she could see was her 18-year-old son under that policeman's knee.⁷ My parents never taught me what I should do if I were ever stopped by a policeman; black parents have to have that talk with their children almost daily. At our Adult Forum last week, I watched a wonderful video which began to open my eyes to the reality of white privilege, which has been so unconsciously engrained in our culture since the first black slaves arrived on our shores in 1619.⁸ I say it “began” to open my eyes because I am only now starting to be able to see, without getting so defensive, what Black Americans have been experiencing my whole life. And I find that what I am seeing occurs *daily*, if I simply read the news with an open heart and mind.

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless...”

My friends, I don't know how you feel about the “issues” of same-sex marriage, homelessness, gangs, and the repeated harassment and killing of blacks by white police officers. But let me offer a suggestion: Don't think of any of these things as “issues,” for they are not. They are people, fellow human beings and children of God, just like you and me. Perhaps, following the example of Jesus, you and I might have compassion on them, because they are often harassed, and are helpless to change the system in which they are caught. In our Gospel, Jesus summons his disciples and gives them the ability to cast out unclean spirits and to heal every sickness. Perhaps, in our troubled time, he is calling *us* to do our part to heal the hurts and divisions of our world? And it starts with a humble desire to see, listen, and understand.

AMEN

1 see: *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*, by Justin Lee; *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* by Matthew Vines; and the heart-breaking video documentary, *Through My Eyes* by Justin Lee https://www.amazon.com/Through-My-Eyes-documentary/dp/B001UL7L8W/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Through+My+Eyes+Justin+lee&qid=1592177662&s=movies-tv&sr=1-1

- 2 <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/14/876760073/virginia-rep-riggleman-who-presided-over-same-sex-wedding-loses-republican-prima>
- 3 <https://religionnews.com/2017/12/31/eugene-peterson-backtracks-on-same-sex-marriage-2/>
- 4 <https://time.com/41918/christian-group-that-flip-flopped-on-gay-marriage-loses-donors/>
- 5 *Welcome Homeless: One Man's Journey of Discovering the Meaning of Home*, by Alan Graham and Lauren Hall | Mar 7, 2017
- 6 Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*
- 7 <https://www.facebook.com/EpiscopalCO/videos/284294155940499/>
- 8 Dr. Robin DiAngelo, “Deconstructing White Privilege”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwIx3KQer54> See also the excellent TED Talk, “How to deconstruct racism, one headline at a time” by Baratunde Thurston: https://www.ted.com/talks/baratunde_thurston_how_to_deconstruct_racism_one_headline_at_a_time