

Be Who You Say You Are/Image is Everything

I didn't really know what to expect on June 16th. My daughter told me she wanted to attend the Pride celebration in Syracuse. She would be marching with the Q Center. We took her gay pride flag down from her window. Yes, pass by my house any evening and you can see the pride glowing from upstairs windows. She wore it like a cape and looked like a superhero. She slapped on some face paint, we got in the car, picked up her friend and were on our way.

We lined up to march and watched everyone. Alex spotted the drag queens. She said in a really excited whisper, "Look! It's a queen! There are the queens. I've never met a queen before. I have to get a picture." She was like a six-year-old girl meeting a Disney princess, a very committed seven-foot tall princess with the 8-inch stiletto heels and big, big hair in 90-degree weather, but a princess nonetheless.

I held my sign that stated I was giving away free mama bear hugs. Two young people from the Syracuse Q-Center came up to me and said what I was doing was a very nice gesture because some of them didn't get hugs from their mother or father. They thanked me and went on their way and I continued to hug anyone who wanted one.

We marched. As a mama bear offering hugs and a volunteer for the Q Center I marched and I observed. I observed the pride among the marchers. Heads were held high. Smiles were wide. I observed the spectators. They were happy, happy to be there and happy for everyone else there. I observed them screaming and cheering loudest for the Q Center and the younger generation following in their rainbow tinted footsteps. I cried. I cried knowing that my daughter had never been in a safer space than at that moment. I cried because of the support she was being shown. I cried because there were many people in that audience who had most likely never had the support that she has at 14 years old, yet there they were showing up for her.

At the festival, there was education, advocacy, crafts, pride gear, food and a show. We had a great time. It was Alex's first time seeing a drag show. She was having a blast. About a half hour before the festivities were over the girls were ready to go home. We got everything together and started the walk back to the car, just the three of us. As we were walking, it began to dawn on me we were walking away from the safety of the LGBTQ community. We were out in public, the girls wearing their flags as capes and they were no longer in a safe space. My mama bear anxiety rose with every step away from the festival. One car honked in support. Someone in a pickup truck yelled out "Go back to your own country!" I was dumbfounded by their ignorance of the pride flag. Alex's friend giggled and Alex was immediately ready to address this. She yelled back at them. Then she started ranting about someone being so ignorant that they thought her flag was from a different country. We got in the car, exhausted, and the day was over.

That day I had such an enriching spiritual experience yet I couldn't quite put it into words as to why. I tried discussing it with my husband but again, I couldn't explain myself. I would have to refresh during a good night of sleep so that I could unpack everything in the morning.

What exactly did I experience at Pride? This would be the first question to answer. First of all, there were no fights or frustrations. Everyone was happy and gay. Pun completely intended. Everyone was respectful and delightful. I can only imagine that the police officers assigned to this event draw straws to get the assignment each year. I experienced people who were free to be themselves in a safe space. This was a liberation to be the people they were created to be. They were imago Dei, the image of God.

I tell you of this experience because of the profound effect it had on me. You see, once I sat down with my feelings about Pride, I was able to come up with several thoughts. First of all, I had to sit with my own theology as a Christian and really apply it. I believe that all of humankind is the image of God. For me this is a very simple theology to believe but much harder to apply.

We Christians get the first part right. "I AM the image of God." Many times we will even go another step forward and look at our Christian sisters and brothers and say, "YOU ARE the image of God." Do you see where I'm going here? For many Christians this is a safe place to stop within the theology of the image of God. I like to challenge people to go two more steps within this journey because it is where the life giving begins.

First of all, we must see the marginalized as the image of God. Then we must see the people we don't agree with, the people who have really made us angry, the people who have hurt themselves and the people who have hurt other people as the image of God. To see people, regardless of who they are or what they've done as *imago Dei*, is to allow them liberation in God as a people and it also allows us liberation in God as a person.

When I was at Pride and I saw the joy, the freedom to be, the celebration, the love, the acceptance, the diversity, I could go on and on, but when I saw these things, I saw God. I felt the spirit of God. The joy and liberation I felt in my heart was really incomparable to much of anything else I'd ever felt in my life. I was free because at that moment, the LGBTQ community was free to be.

Secondly, and this is the most difficult. We must be who we say we are. This is a personal belief. It is also what I fail to apply to my life the most. For me, I look to the Good Samaritan to show me application and living in the image of God.

One of my favorite sermons on the Good Samaritan is written in *Strength to Love*, the first book written by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He has a way of explaining the meaning and ethics of the Good Samaritan that I have chosen to apply to my own life the best I can. If I could ever be a model of the Good Samaritan as Dr. King explains, then I know I am being who I say I am. Or at least who I believe I should be. He utilized altruism as the example of *imago Dei*. Altruism is unselfishness, self-sacrifice, philanthropy and belief in acting for the good of humanity.

The first point Dr. King points out is that the Good Samaritan has the capacity for universal altruism. He has the ability to see beyond race, religion and nationality. Many scholars have come up with many theories as to what religion or nationality the man belonged but do you think it really matters? The Good Samaritan saw the man as a human who needed help. The good neighbor discerns the inner qualities that make all people human and therefore, valued as equal brothers and sisters.

The second point Dr. King makes when describing how to be a good neighbor is having dangerous altruism. I have never been to the Jericho road, I hope someday to visit the Holy Land. One thing I have heard is that road is an extremely dangerous road and it is obvious where thieves could have hidden themselves to rob any passersby. The Levite and the Priest would not stop to help the man. They either did not want to become "unclean" per Jewish Law by touching the bloody man or they did not want to put themselves in more danger. How many times have we avoided helping someone because it might pose a physical danger to us, or even a danger to our "Christian image?" Instead of thinking of the danger he could put himself in, the Samaritan only thought of saving the man who was left lying there to die. Dr. King says in this sermon, "The

ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy.”

The third and final point Dr. King makes about the Good Samaritan is that he had excessive altruism. With his own hands he bound the wounds. He put the man on his own mule and walked the dangerous road himself. He used his own money to care for the man. He promised more money to the innkeeper to care for the man. The Samaritan was able to do more than pity the man. His empathy and ability to sit with the man in his pain gave him the personal concern that demands the giving of more than “help”. The man’s pain, agony and burdens became the Samaritan’s responsibility. He was willing to go far beyond the call of duty. He was willing to be inconvenienced and he was obedient to the point of an unenforceable obligation. No law in the world could have produced this amount of compassion, genuine love and thorough altruism. No law can make us be the image of God. We just must be.

The days of being complicit in the Christian hate shown to the LGBTQ community must end today. The days of passing by on the other side of the street as our LGBTQ brothers and sisters bleed to death because they have been devalued and demoralized by the Christian Church must end today. In March 2018 a study was published in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine which has shown that LGBTQ youth who have grown up in the non affirming church are 38% more likely to have suicidal ideations, attempt suicide or follow through with suicide, 38% more than their non-religious LGBTQ counterparts. The number for Lesbians alone is 52% higher than lesbians who are non-religious. The cis gendered straight youth are less likely to have these tendencies if they are brought up in a church. They have protection provided within the church yet the LGBTQ youth are more at risk because of the non-affirming church.

Our church has taken amazing steps to be the people we say we are. We have become the first Christian affirming church in Auburn NY. We have also welcomed the Q-Center with open arms and a means to hold meetings and support groups for LGBTQ youth. This church has hit levels of universal and dangerous altruism I’ve yet to witness in another Auburn church. I am eager to see the breach into the excessive altruism. What’s next? I am anticipating the day we march as a church in Pride Syracuse and have a booth in the festival offering Mama Bear and Papa Bear hugs to people who have been ostracized by their own family. I am anticipating being the only church to have a pride flag out in front to show support. I am anticipating the day we as a church start a small scale Pride here in Auburn.

We are the image of God for a people who have been oppressed by “godly” people. I encourage you to continue being the light that pierces through the darkness of ignorance and hate. We must not allow the hatred and oppression to be the only image of God the LGBTQ community witnesses in this town. We must go forward and walk hand in hand with a marginalized people, let them lead us in this battle and say to them we see you as the beautiful people you are, as the image of God, how do we help others to see you too? Image is everything.

I felt the liberation of the LGBTQ community on June 16th. I saw the image of God clearly in freedom, joy and the ability to be. This was without marginalization and oppression. I do not want this image to be limited to one day a year for a few hours in a single space. Let us work together. Let us be the people we say we are. A complete picture of the image of God depends on it. An Aboriginal activist in Australia, Lilla Watson is credited with a popular quote. She stated in a speech at the 1985 UN Decade for Women conference in Nairobi, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, let us work together.”

Amen.