

WHY BE OPEN AND AFFIRMING?

In January 1917, right before Woodrow Wilson's second term began, suffragettes began gathering outside the White House every day to protest for women's right to vote. They became known as the Silent Sentinels. After the United States entered World War I in 1917, and the protests continued, many people considered the Silent Sentinels to be unpatriotic. When the Sentinels continued to protest, the courts began handing out jail time.

Thirty-three suffragettes were brought to prison on the night of November 14. They demanded to be treated as political prisoners. Instead, prison superintendent William H. Whittaker called on his guards to teach the women a lesson. One woman had her hands shackled to the top of a cell, forcing her to stand all night. Dorothy Day (the future founder of the Catholic Worker Movement) was slammed down on the arm of an iron bench twice. One woman lost consciousness after her head was smashed into an iron bed; another suffered a heart attack and didn't get medical attention until the following morning. In the aftermath of the attack, many of the women began hunger strikes, as Whittaker denied them counsel and summoned U.S. Marines to guard the workhouse.

But news of their mistreatment spread, and by late November, all of the detainees were released. In early 1918, the D.C. Court of Appeals ruled that the women had been illegally arrested, convicted and imprisoned. Within months, President Wilson began publicly calling on Congress to pass the federal suffrage amendment, in part because of the ongoing protests. On

August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution, codifying the right of women to vote, was passed.

On March 7, 1965, nearly 600 civil rights marchers headed out of Selma, Alabama in favor of voting rights for African Americans and to protest the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a civil rights advocate. When the marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they encountered a wall of state troopers and a county posse waiting for them. The troopers began shoving the demonstrators, knocking many to the ground and beating them with nightsticks. Another detachment of troopers fired tear gas, and mounted troopers charged the crowd on horseback.

Amelia Boynton, an organizer of the march, was beaten unconscious. A photograph of her lying on the road appeared on the front page of newspapers and news magazines around the world. John Lewis, a future Congressman, suffered skull fractures that affected him for the rest of his life. In all, 17 marchers were hospitalized and 50 treated for lesser injuries; the day soon became known as "Bloody Sunday". After the march, President Johnson issued a statement "deploring the brutality with which a number of Negro citizens of Alabama were treated". By March 15, he had sent a federal voting rights bill to Congress.

In the late 1960's, the Stonewall Inn operated in New York City's Greenwich Village as a bar that welcomed gay and lesbian people of all types and races. It was popular among the poorest and most marginalized people in the gay community, such as drag queens, transgender persons, and homeless youth. The owners gave cash bribes, often totaling around \$1200 a month, to the NYPD's 6th Precinct to stave off raids. Despite these payoffs, Stonewall was raided about once a month. Seymour Pine, a police inspector who later led the raid that caused

the Stonewall incident, said his team frequently raided gay bars because LGBTQ people did not fight back when they were arrested.

The Stonewall uprising started in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969. Unlike most raids that took place on weeknights, this one occurred on a Friday when the bar was full of patrons. Around 1:20 a.m., undercover officers, led by Pine, raided the bar. As was customary, the police began to check patrons' identification. The raid did not go as planned, though, as patrol wagons for the arrested patrons took longer to arrive than expected.

A crowd grew as word circulated of a continued police presence. Tempers flared at the continuing detention and humiliation of the patrons. A fight broke out. The police tried to restrain some of the crowd and knocked a few people down, which incited bystanders even more. Eventually, the police were barricaded inside; the crowd was not cleared until 4:00 a.m.

Additional riots and demonstrations continued into early July and spread to other parts of the city and country. Activist Frank Kameny said, "By the time of Stonewall...we had fifty to sixty gay groups in the country. A year later there were at least fifteen hundred. Two years later, to the extent that counts could be made, it was twenty-five hundred. And that was the impact of Stonewall." The first anniversary of the riots was marked by peaceful demonstrations in several American cities that have since developed into pride parades.

Women, African Americans, LGBTQ people. They share the experience of fighting long and difficult struggles to be afforded recognition of their basic human rights. Other examples could be mentioned: Native Americans at Wounded Knee, anti-war demonstrators during Vietnam, and, one might add, the patriots during the Revolutionary War. The episodes discussed here are moments in time when waiting was no longer a viable option. Patience was

no longer a virtue; it had become complicity. As Dr. King wrote to faith leaders in his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail":

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

This truth constitutes a powerful reason why a Christian congregation chooses to be open and affirming: we know that to wait for the world to become more just on its own, as if by some evolutionary process, is not to stand on the side of justice, but to allow the status quo to persist, or grow worse. As the philosopher Edmund Burke wrote centuries ago: "When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one...." There are always people who, possessing a degree of power and authority, are quick to use it to make invisible people different from themselves, as we discussed here last week, and to label them as malcontents and troublemakers.

Women who speak up are hysterical (a word derived from the Latin word for the uterus). African Americans who demand their human rights are uppity. Queer folk who will no longer live in the shadows are predatory. The name calling continues by referring to immigrants as vermin, Muslims as intrinsically violent, Jews as greedy ... but enough examples. We choose to be open and affirming, because justice, goodness, and decency only take root when people work together to bring them to fruition. In the words of Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and author,

"We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

Perhaps some of you are thinking, "Why are we talking about this? We voted to be open and affirming. Do we have to go over all this again?" Yes, we do. Not because your goodwill or your commitment to justice is in question, but because by taking this step, we have decided not to remain as we were. Our beliefs have not changed, but the manner in which we intend to live them has. It is no longer enough just to think the right thing. In truth, it never was, but now we have committed to something more.

This is why I chose the parable of the Good Samaritan for our Gospel reading today. It's a story we have heard a thousand times. There is nothing particularly subtle or nuanced in its message. It underscores the non-negotiable point that being a follower of Christ is not a private matter. Thoughts and prayers are not enough. Accepting the creeds is not enough. No doubt the priest and the Levite felt sorry for the man on the side of road, but they did nothing. What was required was action, involvement, and some skin in the game. When we realize that truth, we hear the voice of Jesus telling us, "Go, and do likewise."

To be open and affirming, to be an authentic ally of people facing prejudice and discrimination, rests on two ideals: unity and love. To be sure, those virtues are found in abundance in many people who are not Christian. Yet, for us, they reside at the heart of our faith. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians, which we just heard, drives home the essential unity that we have in God and in Christ. The repeated refrain about "oneness" is not exclusionary; it is unitive. We are human beings, and that binds us to one another.

Humanity has no "platinum level" members. Of course we have our own experiences, our own traditions, our own ways of viewing the world. But our differences do not make some

people more important, more correct, more “normal.” Again, as we discussed last week, “normal” is a lie. Certainly, using our own measure of “normal” can never be the basis for treating those unlike us as lesser beings. Everyone is our neighbor, and so everyone deserves decency, care, and justice. We have a heightened obligation to be especially attentive to our neighbors who are targets of oppression and discrimination. Here again, Jesus speaks to us: I assure you, whatever you do to the least of these, you do it to me.”

Yet there is a potential trap here. We can treat “affirming” as a synonym for “tolerant.” We can think that affirmation of those different from us is a kindness we afford to people out of the goodness of our hearts. A tone of pity may creep in. We may start to think that we deserve thanks for our forbearance. An attitude of tolerance can lead us to feel aggravation if “those people” insist on more than we feel comfortable with.

True affirmation celebrates the uniqueness of each human being. Cultures unlike ours are not evaluated or judged but perceived as a sign of the multiplicity of gifts. Affirmation challenges us to see beauty and grace in lives lived in ways unlike our own. So, we affirm black culture even if we are not black. We affirm queer culture even if we are not queer. Differences are not threats; we can see differences and embrace new ways of seeing the world. And we have no right to suppress people or their culture just because it makes us uncomfortable or we do not understand it. Being affirming does not require us to adopt other ways of life; it requires us to stand with others so they may do so for themselves. It is not always about us.

This month is Pride Month, and that designation generally focuses on people of differing sexual orientations and gender identifications. Why pride? Isn't pride a sin? Overweening pride can be a moral fault, but in this case, pride means something different. Pride in this context is not an attempt to impose certain ways of living onto others. Here, pride is the antithesis of

shame. Queer folk, black folk, Native Americans, women express "Pride" in who they are because for too long they have been shamed, and taught to shame themselves, simply because of who they are.

As an aside, just a word on the Rainbow flag, which so many seem to fear. It was first designed in 1978, and it was based on a "Brotherhood Flag" from that time which celebrated the various cultures across the world. The Pride flag uses different colors to represent the many types of people who identified as LGBTQ, in some way. It was meant to be an expression of unity amidst diversity. And, as a matter of Scripture, remember that the rainbow was the sign of God's covenant after the Great Flood not only with Noah and his family, but with every living thing. The rainbow is God's expression of concern and care for all life. Perhaps if we saw it in that sense, and not as a political statement, it might be a unifying symbol for all of us.

Like the suffragettes, the civil rights advocates, marginalized people of all types, the systematic insistence that they be silent and continue to live with a sense of disgrace, so as not to cause discomfort to the "normal", is resisted by a healthy pride, a refusal to "get back in the closet." For an open and affirming congregation, we lend our voice and our presence to such demonstrations, not because we identify necessarily with the beliefs or lifestyles of a group, but because no one should have to live ashamed of who they are. Oppressors hate the light; marching or speaking publicly in solidarity with vulnerable people or groups ensures that no one is relegated to the darkness.

Lest we think that the damage of the marginalization of some people is overblown, consider this:

- a third of the women in the United States (over 43 million women) experience sexual or physical violence from an intimate partner, and twenty percent of American women will experience attempted or completed rape in their lives;
- while black Americans make up about 13% of the total population, about 37% of the prison population is black, and 48% of all prisoners serving life or “life without parole” sentences are black;
- LGBTQ+ people experience 106.4 violent victimizations per 1,000 people compared to 21.1 per 1,000 for non-LGBTQ+ individuals, and gay people are nine times more likely to face violent crimes than non-gay people, and
- homicides of transgender and gender non-conforming people nearly doubled between 2017 and 2021, with black transgender women accounting for approximately 50% to 75% of all known transgender homicide victims, though they make up only a small fraction of the broader community.

This problem is not hypothetical. It does not arise from the fevered, overwrought imagination of “woke politicians.” It is real and it is rising. It is breaking the bodies, minds, and hearts of many people, mostly young people, who are too often rejected and dismissed by families, governments, schools, and churches. Our neighbors are, sometimes quite literally, lying on the side of the road, dying.

My friends, let me be blunt: there is no good reason, no holy reason, no acceptable reason, to evade our responsibility to stand with our neighbors. No good reason, no holy reason, no acceptable reason to argue that “our people aren’t ready” or it’s all too confrontational. If we stand aside, we are siding with the priest and the Levite. It may be that “our people” are not ready, but the victims are ready to be healed and helped, so all our good

neighbors need to get ready. To be open and affirming is to be confrontational, because the status quo will continue to destroy and dismay generations after us if we remain silent.

We are not alone in this task. We bear within us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, and when we stand for the least among us, we stand not in our own power but in the power of the Eternal God of the Universe. We shall overcome, because Christ has overcome. The only question is whether we act to protect and lift up our neighbors, or turn away hoping a more opportune, safer, easier moment will come. I assure you, it won't if we do nothing.

Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom." The church is not a fortress; it is a field hospital. Let us be of good cheer, and go forth to be the hope so many of our neighbors desperately need – and deserve.