

Buttercream Bigotry

January 14, 2018

Last month, the Supreme Court heard arguments in the case of *Masterpiece Cakeshop vs. the Colorado Civil Rights Commission*. In this case, baker Jack Phillips refused to make a cake for the wedding of Charlie Craig and David Mullins. Phillips claimed that baking a cake for a gay couple violated his rights: the cakes were protected free speech which could not be compelled. He claimed the freedom of buttercream bigotry.

Lively discussion ensued in the court about what exactly counted as protected artistic expression and what did not. Phillips' lawyer held firm to the idea that baked goods were a form of speech. Justice Elena Kagan pressed the lawyer to find out whether other creative professionals engaged in protected free speech. She asked, "Are chefs, jewelers, hair stylists or makeup artists? Makeup artists? Their name actually has the word artist in it."

Then Justice Sonia Sotomayor went further, "There are sandwich artists now. There are people who create beauty in what they make, but they still don't call it expressive entitlement that is entitled to the first amendment protections."

As much as I loved the funnier aspects of this hearing, my thoughts remained with Craig and Mullins who ran into homophobia covered in the achingly sweet frosting of Christian piety. It's as if the Gospel says, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in him shall not perish from this earth but shall always hate the gays."

A friend of mine tells a slightly more subtle story of buttercream bigotry. Close to 20 years ago, he and his husband went to a bakery for their wedding cake. They did exactly what Scott and I did, they did all of the tastings, they picked out the filling and the frosting, they brought a picture from *Martha Stewart Living* with pretty yellow fondant ribbons that they hoped would decorate the cake. And when the day came, the cake arrived – plain. They never went back to ask, "Was that a subtle homophobic act, a slight jab?" But to this day they wonder.

Many of us could tell similar stories of ambiguous moments: the bank teller who demands identification from the Latino customer before accepting a deposit, the store clerk who wants to check the bag of the black shopper, the man who makes the suggestive comment to a female colleague – those moments that leave us asking, "Did that happen because ...?"

How are we to respond to those moments?

David Brooks wrote about the *Masterpiece Cakeshop* case shortly after the Supreme Court arguments. His advice: Gays should just be good neighbors. Craig and Mullins should have just moved on to the bakery down the street. He spoke in the long tradition of people who say, "I support your rights. Just don't get too pushy about them."

Indeed, he ended his article saying, “I fervently support gay marriage, but I don’t think bakers like Jack Phillips are best brought along by the iron fist of the state. I don’t think that the fabric of this country will be repaired through an angry confrontation.” In other words, David Brooks just wants the gays to be nice. Patience, he counsels. Now is not the right time to make waves.

We heard now is not the right time a lot this year, didn’t we? Martin Luther King once got a similar message from people who supported his cause, but thought his tactics were untimely. Just be patient, they told him. And that was what he was responding to in his Letter From Birmingham Jail. Just be patient. Now is not the time.

In his Letter From Birmingham Jail which Judy read so powerfully today, he said, “Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, ‘Wait.’” Whether we’re talking about the deplorable state of race relations in this country 50 years after Dr. King’s death, LGBTQ rights in the midst of the wedding cake suit, or sexual violence amidst the #metoo movement, Dr. King was prophetic when he proclaimed that civil rights and social change don’t simply happen by waiting. Quoting William Gladstone, King said, “Justice deferred is justice denied.” *

But what do you and I do? Many of you have marched and rallied, written letters, gotten involved. Our scriptures today give us two sets of marching orders, one overt, and one a little less so. In the reading from 1 Samuel which Cheryl shared with us today, we have a story of a niggling voice at the back of Samuel’s head that won’t let go, that won’t leave him alone. He keeps trying to figure out what it is, and then eventually he says, “Here I am, Lord, speak, for your servant is listening. Here I am, Lord. Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Listening to the voice of God, listening for the voice of God, the voice of justice, the voice that speaks to you in the night, that voice that churns your stomach and won’t let you go is central to leading a moral life. Listening, and then saying, “Here I am, Lord. Speak, for your servant is listening.”

The marching orders from our Gospel are a little less straightforward. Today we heard the call of Nathaniel who said, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” One can almost hear the echo of time carrying Nathaniel’s voice over the centuries and over the ocean until it says, “Can anything good come out of Haiti, or Africa?” But Phillip, in his genius, says, “Come and see.” He doesn’t try to argue logically with Nathaniel. He doesn’t give examples of great Nazarenes. He says, “Come and see. Come, experience Jesus.”

The honorable Reverend Everett Mitchell is a circuit court judge in Dane County and pastor of Solid Rock Baptist Church. He’s a tremendous man of God who you’ll be hearing more about from me and in the wider world, I am sure. He says that the way that we are going to shift the tide of segregation and racial injustice in this country is by what he calls Jesus’ hang out principle. Jesus brings together a breadth of people, and then he hangs out with them in their homes. He has fellowship time with them. He learns about what makes them tick, isn’t afraid of them, learns mercy and builds relationships. Reverend Mitchell says that the way, the biggest way, that we are going to overcome the

racial divide in our country is by having people who don't look like us over for dinner. And that's what Jesus did. He got close to people in order to shift the power dynamic and help them change their own world.

David Brooks gave the advice that always comes to those who wait for justice: Wait. Be a little nicer. Just smile, and put up with a little discrimination. But that was not Jesus' way. Instead, Jesus got close. He listened, and then he stood shoulder to shoulder building relationships and toppling the power structures of his day.

Bigotry comes in many flavors: the racial bigotry which Dr. King fought, and the more subtle buttercream bigotry of refusing to make a wedding cake. Nonetheless the lessons of the Gospel are the same: listen for the voice of God and build relationships with people who are different from you. Get close to them, and invite them into your homes. It is then, as Dr. King ended his letter from jail with: "the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."

Let us employ Jesus' hang out principle and, in doing so, bring our nation that much closer to our truth that we hold to be self evident, that each and every one of us are created equal. Alleluia and Amen.

* "Buttercream Bigotry" (above) is quoted from a December 3, 2017 sermon by Rev. Andrew Warner at Plymouth United Church of Christ, Milwaukee

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