

Breaking Idols: Love Over and Over and Over Again

October 20, 2019

God Breathed

For close to 30 years, starting in the early '80s, Rev. Mike Piazza was the Senior Pastor of the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas. In those years, Piazza and his team grew the Cathedral of Hope from 350 members to 4,000 members, making it the largest LGBTQ oriented ministry in the world. Rev. Piazza led that church through troubling times, not the least of which was the height of the AIDS crisis, during which the church would host between 30 to 40 funerals a week.

In his book, "The Real Anti-Christ," Piazza writes:

Over the years, I have appeared frequently on radio or television programs, or live panels where I debated the subject of whether or not gay people could be Christians, or perhaps about the civil rights of LGBT people. It always stunned me at how nasty those arguments could get. Clergy who could be perfectly charming when they debated Muslims or atheists would become completely hateful about gay people. My strategy time and again was to lower my voice and be as polite, gentle, and kind as possible. I believed that those in the audience soon would see which of us was more Christlike in that moment. Most often it worked.

On one occasion the audience of college students so turned against my debate opponent that I was forced to come to his rescue. At that point, an audience member asked me, "Why are these so-called Christians so angry at gay people?" I looked at the red-faced clergyman I'd been disagreeing with all night, and it hit me. He wasn't angry at me; he was afraid of me. "Homophobia" is a very accurate word. Yet, he wasn't really afraid of my sexuality, or of the possibility that God might love me, or even of me and my kind gaining equal rights. He was simply terrified that he might be wrong. That idea that his faith was built on faulty presumptions was so overwhelming that he had to use extraordinary effort, energy, and passion to keep it at bay. After all, if he were wrong about something like this, that he had believed with absolute conviction his entire life, what else might he be wrong about?

Today as our congregation celebrates having voted 20 years ago to be Open and Affirming, it is divine providence that in the Lectionary, the suggested scripture readings for worship for mainline Protestants and Catholics all over the globe, the epistle reading today is 2 Timothy, starting with chapter 3, verse 14, where we read:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Friends, our scripture lesson today tells us to continue in what we have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom we have learned it. We are to continue in Jesus' extravagant love. We are to continue in breaking down barriers, especially human barriers to real human connection and relationship. We are to continue in Jesus' work of mercy and compassion and healing and hope. We are to continue in Jesus' work of reconciling, of bringing people together, not driving wedges in between them.

I'll admit, that I wavered a little bit about whether or not to use this scripture, fearing that some would call my interpretation "revisionist," that some would say I was manipulating the Word to fit our agenda. But friends, with fervent prayer and honest scholarship, I can genuinely look you in the eye and say I believe in the depth of my being that the overwhelming witness of the scriptures is toward ever more inclusion, ever more love, and ever expanding boundaries of who we are called to love. That being Open and Affirming doesn't just fit in to the Biblical witness, but rather that our church's expansive understanding of Godly love is indeed THE Biblical witness. Being ONA is where Jesus has been leading us all along. We have allowed people to imagine for too long that those who read the Bible through a "fundamentalist" or "inerrant" lens to hold the gold standard, while in reality, they have made idols out of random verses that do not hold up the rest of the text.

Idols

I first met Bryan Massingale in 1985 when my Confirmation class was sent into the inner city of Milwaukee to serve dinner at a homeless shelter. Being from a small town in rural Wisconsin, there were a lot of new things to me that day, including meeting a young man who was studying for ministry who was black and who was gay. While the idea of a black, gay Catholic priest was new to me, the integrity that exuded from Bryan's being made what might otherwise seem anomalous a non-issue.

Fast forward 35 years, Bryan is still a Catholic priest, and now he is on the philosophy faculty at Fordham, teaching ethics. He tells the story of how, in the early '80s, he went on a 40-day retreat. On the first day, as is typical, he was assigned to pray with the creation story in Genesis. In his meditation everything unfolded beautifully, the sky, the water, the land, the plants and animals and humans. He says he looked at creation and saw his friends and people he knew, and it was wonderful.

Except, as I looked at creation and the world's people, I noticed that when creation was finished, there wasn't a single Black person. Nor were there any gay people. As I looked at humanity, at all those created in the image of God, there were none that looked like me. Or loved like me. There was nothing in creation that mirrored me.

"Despite what I had been taught about how all human beings are created in God's image and likeness – at some deep place within me, I didn't believe it. I didn't believe it. My own prayer betrayed that I didn't believe it. I didn't believe that God could be imaged as Black. Or as gay. And certainly not as both simultaneously.

This cut him to the core. He wept and moaned. He couldn't sleep. As someone studying for ministry, this was foundational. He says that it was only after he had "*exhausted all of my hurt and anger, my fear and pain, my outrage – it was only then that God could break through the cracks of my soul. Then I could hear God when I read these words, 'You are precious in my sight, and I love you.'*" (Isaiah 43). It was only after he had broken the idol of the white hetero God that he was able to see himself in creation.

Massingale uses this story as a jumping off point to argue that what the church is in need of isn't a new sexual ethic for sexually minoritized persons, but rather a better image of God. He argues that for LGBTQ Christians, the issue which causes the most estrangement, alienation, and pain is that we have been worshipping an idol, a false image of God. At the heart of this idol is the idea that to be Christian is to be straight. Mainstream Christianity "*tells a story where **only** heterosexual persons, heterosexual love, heterosexual intimacy, heterosexual families – only these can unambiguously mirror the Divine. Only these are truly sacred. Genuinely holy. Only these are worthy of unreserved acceptance and respect. All other persons and expressions of love, family life, intimacy, and sexual identity are sacred (if at all) only by toleration or exception.*"

Friends, long before we can have a discussion about re-thinking the church's sexual ethics, we need to re-think God!

We have to get the false "god" out of our heads. Because this false "god" is the deepest reason for both LGBTQ social persecution and the inner estrangement and struggles with self-acceptance of many in our community. For how can we love ourselves if we don't believe we are worthy of God's love? If we believe we don't belong in creation, or that God never intended for people to be gay? If we believe that, at best, "God" only tolerates gays and their pursuits of love? But that "god" is a false god, an idol: a human construct made to justify exclusion and injustice. This is why the issue of idolatry is not a matter of interest only for theological "geeks" like me...

Idols, as Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us, are murderous gods. Idols demand sacrifices: the sacrifice of our integrity, of our intelligence, of our love, and even of our lives. Death threats, the public humiliation and torture of gay people, the killing of trans persons, the epidemic of suicides among LGBTQ people, and the silence of the Church regarding these – all attest to the murderous implications of the idolatry that legitimates.

Blessed to Bless.

In our passage from Genesis this morning, Jacob wrestles with an unknown figure, usually understood to be God. At day break, as the sun rises on a new day literally and symbolically, Jacob tells the being that he's been wrestling with that he won't let go until he receives a blessing. So, too, it needs to be with our wrestling with the idol of heteronormativity in the church. This church voted 20 years ago to be Open and Affirming, a tremendous, prophetic witness. And yet too often, we slip back into the idol

of a heteronormative God, that the way our church reads the Bible is an exception, or revisionist. Jacob understood that after wrestling with God, he needed a blessing. So, too, do we.

And so, on this 20th anniversary of being Open and Affirming, may you be blessed to know that the all-inclusive love of God you believe in is absolutely orthodox. May you be blessed to know that all of us, LGBTQIA, allies, cis, straight, and everyone we don't have a letter for yet, all of us are made in the image and likeness of God. May you be blessed to know that any pain that you endured due to exclusion, God can transform in your life for you to use to fuel others' inclusion - not only down lines of sexual and gender inclusion, but also in regard to race and ethnicity and ableism and so much more. May you be blessed to know that the prophetic stance that this church took 20 years ago made a difference, that not only has it included and healed and transformed, it has saved lives.

As we look back at how far LGBTQ issues have come in the last 20 years, it is in no small part because of the work that churches like ours have done. But our work is not over, and we have in no way arrived. Today we pause to celebrate, but tomorrow we pick up the torch again: to champion those who have been excluded, to break down idols, to be agents of God's healing, redeeming love over and over and over again.

<https://www.dignityusa.org/news/challenge-idolatry-lgbti-ministry>

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Genesis 32:22-31; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
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