

## **Come Out, Christians All**

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June 26, 2016

Change, and the consequences of change, is a theme that permeates today's readings. In the story of Elisha's succession of Elijah, the advice Paul sends to the Galatians and the enigmatic comments of Jesus, we encounter the different ways in which lives are transformed. These stories are particularly appropriate on a day that we now call Pride Sunday on which we celebrate the remarkable ways in which the LGBT community has been welcomed into the larger community and, in the Episcopal Church, into the human family of God. Let's take a closer look at these stories.

We start with the story of the end of the prophet Elijah's life, when he was about to be taken up to heaven. His student, Elisha, will not leave him to die by himself. Twice Elijah tells him to leave and twice Elisha shows his bravery and his loyalty and respect for his elder by refusing to leave as long as Elijah lives. When Elijah inquires about what he can give Elisha, the young man asks for a "double share of your spirit." Soon after that request, we see the transformation of Elisha from student to prophet: Elijah ascends in a whirlwind to heaven, Elisha takes the mantle Elijah left behind and uses it to perform the miracle of parting the Jordan River so he could cross over.

Scholars speculate on the meaning of Elisha's request of a "double share of your spirit;" was it a request to be seen as Elijah's rightful heir? To have twice as much prophetic power as his elder? I wonder if it weren't a bit simpler. Elisha knew the reality of a prophet's existence, that to be chosen by God to speak for God is an awesome responsibility and that to succeed Elijah meant filling some very large shoes. To speak

truth to power, as is the prophet's role, will take all he has and a double measure of Elijah's spirit certainly wouldn't hurt.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is ignored by one community and moves on towards the next. When asked by his disciples whether they should punish the village for ignoring him, he rebukes them for the idea and continues on his way. He will not be distracted from his journey by punishing those who don't want to hear his word.

Along the way, he encounters people who do want to follow him. He tells one who expresses the desire to follow him wherever he goes that he has absolutely no idea just how hard that will be. To others who have important things to do before they follow him, he says that there is no reason to delay in following God, not even the death of a father or saying goodbye to one's family. The time to seek God is now.

Paul's letter to the people of Galatia is addressed to people who are in conflict about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. There is a division of opinion among the Jewish and the Gentile followers of Jesus. Are the Gentile followers required to observe the Hebraic law, which would require male Gentiles to be circumcised? Who is in and who is out? What are the rules that define being a follower of Jesus?

Paul's reply is that our actions are what define us as Christians. Citing what he calls the "single commandment," (you shall love your neighbors as yourself) he encourages his people to live by the spirit, which is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and gentleness. Give up, he says, strife, anger, factions, self-destructive behavior. Don't worry about who is in or out. As followers of Jesus, we are on a journey towards the divine.

From the first century, I'd like to move forward in time to 1978. Some of you may not even have been alive but it was an important year in many ways. A ballot initiative in California known as the Briggs Initiative (because it was sponsored by State Senator John Briggs) qualified for the November ballot. It was a particularly mean-spirited proposal that would allow any public school employee – teacher, teacher's aide, counselor or administrator – to be fired because they were gay or, even if they weren't gay, because they publicly supported gay rights. Who could be a teacher? Who's in and who's out? The initiative was the first attempt in the US to restrict gay and lesbian rights through a statewide ballot measure.

In 1978, there were places, like the Bay Area, that were quite tolerant of the LGBT community but the Bay Area was the exception, not the rule. Many in the LGBT community were "in the closet" because they feared, rightly so in many cases, that they could lose their jobs, be disowned by their families, or be evicted, harassed or beat up. There were few gay characters on TV or in the movies, few openly gay celebrities or politicians. It was in this environment that activists mobilized opposition to the initiative, paradoxically it would seem, under the slogan "Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are."

As the election season progressed, thousands of gay men and lesbians responded to this call. Perhaps with a double share of Elijah's spirit, they spoke truth to power, the very personal, relationship based power found at home, in neighborhoods, churches, and places of employment. They came out to their families, neighbors and co-workers, wrote letters to editors. They took the risk of rejection, scorn and derision by friends, family and strangers to reveal an important truth about themselves. They showed anyone who would listen that gays and lesbians are everywhere and are people that they already

knew and cared about.

Although approval of the initiative was initially supported by 60% of voters, it failed by a large margin, with 58% of voters voting no.

Much has changed in the past 40 years to be sure but there are still many ways in which many of us hide an important part of ourselves from the world. I learned this in a unique way while I was still at the School for Deacons. I overheard a good friend say to a group of women that “Pam’s not one of THOSE Christians.” I didn’t need to hear the question – I’m fairly sure it was something like Pam’s doing what? Is she out of her mind?

It is unfortunate but true that, in our increasingly secular society, a common stereotype of Christians is not flattering: narrow-minded, judgmental, critical, bigoted, more concerned with who shares their doctrine than respecting the dignity of every human being. As you and I know, that does not describe the Episcopal Church in general, this parish in particular and the people in it. But when we hide part of ourselves, we allow other people to define us in their often unkind and negative ways.

So my invitation to you is similar to the one made in 1978: come out. Come out as Christians. If you want to share the journey we are taking as followers of Jesus, come out. Come out to Castro Valley Pride on July 9. Come out to National Night Out on August 2. Come out to Sacred Space. Following Jesus is not always easy. Sometimes we have to go places that make us uncomfortable, even frightened. But the time to follow him is now.

Join Father Justin and the outreach team and the social

ministries team and me in sharing this journey of faith with our community. Let us show this community by our actions that following Jesus means to stand for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and gentleness.

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