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Can I Get a Witness

Some of you may know that before coming to St. Bart's to serve as your Priest in Charge, I was serving as the Executive Director of a small, national nonprofit called Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries ("ELM")

ELM supports and advocates for LGBTQIA+ seminarians and clergy in the Lutheran church – trying to help them find calls that are safe and helping them navigate seminary and the formation process in ways that honor their full selves and identities

It was only in 2009 that the largest Lutheran denomination – the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – changed their policy to allow publicly out and partnered LGBTQIA+ folks to serve as clergy

Someday, I'll tell you the beautiful, radical genesis of ELM in the 1990s – it involves illegal ordinations and silent protests at national gatherings that see people from the ages of 28 to 88 being arrested

But, by the time I took on the role of executive director the landscape was different – no less challenging, but different

By the time I became the Executive Director, the denomination had had their vote to "legalize" queer folks serving as clergy

But, this wasn't universally accepted or implemented and some of the leadership in the church and congregations still exhibited prejudicial behaviors towards queer people

I traveled the country visiting congregations, Bishops, and the national denomination to speak to the fabulous ministries that were led by queer leaders and to advocate for more space to be made for the many queer leaders who were still waiting for calls

When I first started traveling, I thought that my conversations with folks would be argumentative – I thought I'd have to defend the beauty and wholeness of queer-bodied people and identities.

I readied myself by re-reading some of the “clobber verses” – the 7 verses in the Bible that are most used against the queer community – and prepared my theological arguments against them

But, you know what, that's not what people wanted to talk about

they wanted to know about me and my experiences – they took to heart my stories of speed bumps in my own process, the micro and macro aggressions that I experienced in my first call; but also the stories of discovering faith at new levels because of how my queer identity helped me to see the world and to see God

Folks loved it when I could tell them about the transformation other communities experienced of having their hearts burst open after welcoming queer leaders into their pulpits and pews

The hearts and minds of the folks I engaged with weren't “convinced” by academic, theological, theoretical arguments, they were opened by the Spirit when I described how faith was alive and thriving in the queer leaders of my community

Outside of some of the administrative duties of being an executive director, my job – ultimately– was to be a witness: to testify to the goodness of God and the power of the Spirit in the queer community

And, if you haven't learned yet, I can talk about that all day!

Don't get me wrong – the “clobber verses” came up from time to time – when in conversation with the really closed minded folks, those who were

sticklers for the rules and sticklers for more literal and “traditional” readings of the Bible

Much like the religious leaders in our gospel reading from John this morning

In today’s gospel, a man who was born blind is healed and given sight by Jesus

The religious and community leaders are flabbergasted and skeptical – who did this? how did he do this? this can’t be the man who used to be blind?

Their legalistic minds cannot make space for the healing and hope of Jesus’ ministry – they get caught up in technicalities and, like Nicodemus a few weeks ago, are trying to make Jesus’ ministry fit into the boxes they have created for “acceptable ministries”

And the man who experienced the healing – he’s so patient, he answers their questions every time, though towards the end definitely gets a little snarky in his response

But all he can speak to is his experience: “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight...He is a prophet.”

Now, there is so much in this reading that needs to be unpacked:

There is terrible ableism that can be read into this text – one might claim that this text clearly states that sight is better than blindness – the disciples’ question about the role of sin in the man’s blindness (whether it’s the result of his parents’ sins or his own) gives voice to what centuries of people and communities have believed: that a disability is the sign of sin, or brokenness completely forgetting Jesus’ response to the disciples which is “it’s neither!”

And, in the gospel of John we get a lot of light and darkness illustrations where “light” is synonymous with good, enlightenment, and right-ness; and “darkness” is synonymous with bad, unknowing, and wrong-ness which, in the United States, has had the terrible effect of reinforcing racism and white supremacy through years of rhetoric and meaning-making – something people of faith and all those who use this metaphor need to be aware of

To get into what is needed to bring reconciliation in our church around becoming anti-ableist and anti-racist is a bit beyond my sermon time slot today, but it starts with the testimony of those most affected

The reconciliation of the community toward the blind man *and* the reconciliation of the community towards Jesus as the Messiah started with the healed man saying “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight...He is a prophet.”

The greatest transformations I saw in my work with ELM weren’t in discussing with Bishops and church leaders whether my queerness is a result of my parent’s sin or my own – it was when I was able to be in front of people and say “Jesus loves me, this I know!”

Two other points I want to connect about this text are these:

1 - Last week we heard the longest dialog between Jesus and another person when we heard the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well – This week, we heard the longest absence of Jesus from a dialog in a gospel

2 - the river that the blind man was told to wash his face in translates to “sent” – a point John makes sure to highlight in his text and not assume we might know

Bringing those points together: The man who was healed was then sent into dialog with conservative religious leaders and community skeptics without Jesus physically present to guide him

I can relate, can you?

Is this not our calling and our context?

Were we not washed in water, marked with the cross of Christ, and imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit at our Baptisms – and does that not translate to “sent”

Jesus is not absent from us whatsoever, the Spirit makes God’s presence known to us in so many ways

But, in some ways, our context is so similar to that of the healed man: the landscape of Christianity today has many conservative voices trying to fit Jesus’ ministry into boxes of acceptability on one side and skeptics on the other and Jesus is not physically present to guide us

But, those who are God’s beloveds are sent

Those who have experienced the transformational, healing love of God are sent

John’s gospel this morning is calling out to us “Can I get a witness?!”

Can I get someone to testify to the goodness of God in their lives?

Can I get someone to tell the story of how their lives were changed by deep moments of faith?

It *is* who and what we are called to be and do

And, I believe, it is the only way we change our world – tell our stories and listen to the stories of others

Whether it's around kitchen tables or in the workplace cafeteria, testify to the wholeness you've experienced

Whether it's in words or actions, testify to the grace that has filled you with hope and love

And, you know me, when words fail, I sing...

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above  
of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.  
I love to tell the story, because I know it's true  
it satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.  
I love to tell the story, twill be my theme in glory,  
to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.*

Amen.