

June 5, 2022
Pentecost, Year C
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Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Psalm 8
Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

Today in church we are celebrating two events: Trinity Sunday and LGBTQ+ Pride month.

Let's start with Pride, which seems to be particularly evident on my radar screen this year. That heightened awareness is likely connected to the intersection of two things: first, the reinvigorated political attacks on LGBTQ+ folks; and second, my own coming out anniversary. This summer I will celebrate the 30th anniversary of my coming out, which happened when I was 30 years old. You can see the synchronicity to that. For the last several months, the sequence of events leading up to the day I came out has been much on my mind.

Thought I didn't come out until I was 30, I always felt somehow different. Even while having no language for it, I knew that I was I was not *like* other girls, and I knew that I wanted to *be with* other girls. In my context, children were really quite insistently trained into cis-heteronormativity. And as with so much social difference, children even served as the youngest enforcers charged with its policing. *My* difference came to feel frightening and shameful and dangerous. Therefore, for a very long time, I did my best to keep it boxed up tight. But that knowing was still there, and its need to be acknowledged became more insistent over time, slowly but inevitably growing from a whisper into a shout.

It was shouting, and still I approached middle age determined to keep whatever it was securely hidden, afraid to even risk taking it out and looking at it, because *something* would happen. I still don't even know what that *something* was. I would be a monster? God would strike me down? I don't know. There was virtually no place to turn for a positive perspective on it. This was before the internet put information at our fingertips. This was even before Ellen DeGeneres came out.

Of course the social enforcers of cis-heteronormativity aged along with me. I was living in Seattle then, working for a consulting engineering firm. I was literally the only woman engineer on staff. Our office was located at the base of Capital Hill, the home of Seattle's gay district. Because of that location, or maybe because my workplace was generally toxic, my male coworkers often made horrible homophobic comments and told sickening homophobic jokes, almost always targeting gay men. I *never* called them out on it, because I was afraid that calling them out would cause them to suspect I was gay. It was ridiculous. But so much of what I was thinking and doing was ridiculous, and it was painful. I was both ashamed of my secret, and ashamed of the things I was doing to keep my secret. I was miserable.

That office homophobia had a plus side, because that's how I learned that Seattle even has a gay district, and that it was very close by. I started literally sneaking up the hill at lunchtime, looking around to see if anybody from the office could see me, and I found a bookstore that had information. Long story short, one night I finally decided I had to do *something*. I don't even know what tipped the scales that night. The next morning—July 7, 1992—I picked up the phone in my office and called the Lesbian Resource Center, a local nonprofit, to ask whether they hosted a coming out support group. Thank God, literally, they did, and I attended later that very week. Just making that call gave me instant relief. Meeting the women in the support group gave me instant joy. They weren't monsters, of course they weren't monsters, so probably neither was I. And, God did not strike me down. I very quickly then came out to myself and to just about everyone else in my life.

My 31st year was painful but also funny and joyous and exciting. This is only the condensed version of the story, as you can imagine, and I'll further condense by saying that my life quickly shifted from feeling very *meager* to feeling very *rich*. It's kind of like that movie *The Wizard of Oz*. It's probably not a mistake that it appeals to many gay men. You know how Kansas was filmed in black-and-white, but Oz was filmed in Technicolor? For me, coming out felt like a little like moving from Kansas to Oz, except I got to stay there. Everything suddenly felt alive and vibrant, including me. I didn't belong in Kansas. I belonged in Oz. In Oz I arrived home for the first time. Without all that shame, I could occupy *my body* and *the world* like I never had before.

Finally, let's turn to the Bible. Because it's Trinity Sunday, the Epistle for today is a portion of Paul's Letter to the Romans that includes God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Because it's short, I want to read it again:

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.¹

Sometimes I think Paul was too poor to afford the papyrus necessary to write his letters: here, as is so often the case, he packs a lot of information into two run-on sentences. You may have heard me say this before, but I'll say it again: Paul was not trying to write systematic theology; he was trying to manage crisis. In this case Paul was writing to the Romans because this nascent community of Christ-followers was having a bit of an identity crisis. I can relate to that. Paul tells them that the old rules don't matter anymore. What is, is; it doesn't matter what you do. You are justified—that is, you are in relationship with God, you stand in God's grace, you share in God's glory—simply because you have faith. Nothing can change that. Nothing can take it away.

I want to talk about the word *boast*, a verb that occurs twice in this passage; Paul says: “we boast in our hope” and “we boast in our sufferings.” I want to be clear that I am very suspicious of the idea of redemptive suffering, or suffering for suffering’s sake. But I don’t think that’s how we have to understand this. I think Paul is saying instead that God is with us in our suffering, and even that God leads us through it. I might even hazard that the one who is with us in our suffering is Jesus; the one who leads us through it is the Holy Spirit. Maybe that’s one way to begin to understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Before we go there, I want to note that the word translated as *boast* here is translated from the Greek word *καυχάομαι* (*kauchaomai*). It’s only used in the New Testament, only in the Epistles of the New Testament, and almost all in Paul’s real Epistles. Other passages and other Bible translations use other English words for this Greek word; the most common one used *glory*: “we glory in our hope”; “we glory in our sufferings.” In other words, the Greek word means to glory in or on account of something.² And Merriam-Webster defines the verb *glory* as meaning “to rejoice proudly” in.³ Paul then says that we Christians rejoice proudly in our hope, we rejoice proudly in our suffering, as evidence of love.

“To rejoice proudly in” sounds a lot like what LGBTQ+ Pride is all about. It took me a long time to come out, and it took me even longer to find a Christianity that I could rejoice proudly in. If I had had access to a Christianity that was affirming of LGBTQ+ people, my life would have been very different. It breaks my heart that not every young person has that even today. But it gladdens my heart that some young people do, and that this is one of the places where they can find it. I’ll say that that’s not just because we’re affirming of LGBTQ+ people, and I think all of our young people know that. It’s really because of what it points us toward: a radically inclusive understanding of God’s creative, receptive, and sustaining love.

There are many things in life that are a mystery to me. Case in point: the Trinity. One god in three persons? I mean, really. There are metaphors for the Trinity, but the metaphors don’t really work. There are diagrams of the Trinity, but the diagrams don’t really work, either. Instead, I think the best way to understand the Trinity is to rely on what you know. God created you, God is with you, God is leading you. Listen. Boast. Rejoice proudly in God.

Notes

¹ Romans 5:1-5 NRSV.

² “καυχάομαι” (Strong’s G2744), in the Blue Letter Bible, available online at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2744/kjv/tr/0-1/> (accessed June 12, 2022).

³ “glory,” Merriam-Webster, available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glory> (accessed June 12, 2022).