

May 12, 2019
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

On Wednesday I got a call and an email from Ed Stannard, a reporter for the New Haven Register. Ed happens to be a member of Trinity Episcopal Church on the Green. I provided comments for him once before. This week's email said this: "I'm writing a story about Franklin Graham coming to Bridgeport on May 28 and would like to speak with you about whether St. Thomas's is planning to respond in any way, with a protest or alternative service or something. I'd also like your take on Graham's anti-LGBTQ stance and how it compares with St. Thomas's and your views."

So, yes, in case you haven't heard, Franklin Graham is coming to Bridgeport's Seaside Park. Someone from the Graham organization phoned the church about it a couple of months ago. Then, two weeks ago, I began receiving emails from the sender "Franklin Graham Decision America Northeast Tour." The emails are coming to the address I use on our website, so they must have gone online and culled a list of local pastors. Either they didn't read my bio, or they haven't given up on me yet. Checking my annoyance, I resisted the temptation to unsubscribe from the email list, thinking I might learn something. The fourth and fifth emails arrived this week, one containing downloadable bulletin inserts. Needless to say, we didn't reproduce them for you.

In case you need a refresher, Franklin Graham most famously is the son of Billy Graham. He succeeded his father as President and CEO of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Unlike his father, Franklin has not avoided social divisiveness and political partisanship. For example, he has made inflammatory comments about Islam and questioned President Barack Obama's Christianity. His current tour name, "Decision America," sounds to me less like a revival meeting and more like a political event.

Ed Stannard phoned most particularly about LGBTQ+ issues, and that's what I'll focus on here. In particular, I'll note that Graham is a supporter of conversion therapy for gay people and has fought against legislation to ban it. Conversion therapy is the thoroughly debunked theory that a gay person can be changed into a straight person. Conversion therapy on minors has been banned in sixteen states and Washington, D.C.; somewhat predictably, most of those states are located in New England and along the West Coast; fortunately Connecticut is among them.

I mention this because of another email that recently landed in my Inbox. This one came from parishioner Kyle Holton, who teaches at an alternative school in New Haven. His book group there has been studying *Boy Erased*, the memoir by Garrard Conley about his experience of conversion therapy. A film of the same name, based on the book, was released last fall.

Part of *Boy Erased* is the gay author's relationship with his conservative Christian parents, and especially his mother's change of heart. In a video interview available online, she offers this: "I say I took Garrard to conversion therapy, but I was the one that was converted...." She continues, "... I prayed the wrong prayer for a couple of years: 'God change Garrard.' What if he's saying, 'No, I don't need to change Garrard.' And so I started praying the prayer, 'God, if I'm wrong, change my heart.' And it started happening."¹ The author and his mother are working together to educate Christians about conversion therapy and to advance laws nationwide that prohibit it.

Kyle emailed to invite me and Sara Misgen to come and talk to the book group youth, saying this: "One of the results of our conversation has been quite a bit of religion bashing. Completely understandable. I've supported the criticism, but I also would like for them to hear from others who have found ways to resist the fundamentalism in religion while embracing other aspects of their tradition." Sara and I will be visiting the group on Tuesday.

Now, I can relate to those religion bashers, because I used to do a fair amount of it myself. But here's the thing for me: That impulse to bash arose from a place of deep woundedness. Even while bashing, I yearned for a way to return.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter our Gospel reading is a portion of John 10. Jesus talks about sheep so much in John 10 that we can divide it into three parts, one for each year. This is lectionary year C, so we heard the third of the three parts.

Jesus has already gone on about sheepfold and gate and bandit and wolf and shepherd. Now, folks are annoyed. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." In response, Jesus returns to the subject of sheep, adding this: "I and the Father are one." Note that this is not a statement about Trinitarian theology, but rather an expression of unity between Jesus and God. One commentator summarizes it this way: "Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus' unity with the Father consists, first, of a unity of words and deeds. Jesus says what the Father is saying and does what the Father is doing. Thus the primary argument in John for the messiahship of Jesus is the character of Jesus' deeds." There's more, though, as the commentator adds: "The Gospel of John does not see faith as simply a human deed. Faith includes the action of God. John's ... doctrine of election surfaces here. In John, belief in Jesus depends upon being chosen by God to be one of Jesus' flock."²

The concept of being chosen carries a lot of implications. For now, I want to mention just one: this removes the middlemen and gives every person a direct line to God. Through Jesus, God has touched you. You are a sheep of Jesus' flock; you belong to God. No one can separate you from the knowledge and love of God. No one can separate anyone else whom God has chosen from the knowledge and love of God.

Franklin Graham is most recently in the news for his Twitter exchange with presidential candidate, South Bend Mayor, and practicing Episcopalian Pete Buttigieg. Graham tweeted this: “Mayor Buttigieg says he’s a gay Christian. As a Christian I believe the Bible which defines homosexuality as sin, something to be repentant of, not something to be flaunted, praised or politicized. The Bible says marriage is between a man & a woman—not two men, not two women.” He later tweeted this: “The core of the Christian faith is believing and following Jesus Christ, who God sent to be the Savior of the world—to save us from sin, to save us from hell, to save us from eternal damnation.”³

Last Sunday was the final session of this year’s Inquirers Class. Every year the class is wonderful in its own way. I love leading it, in part because it reminds me of why I love the Episcopal Church. One of the reasons I love the Episcopal Church is because we spend very little time worrying over eternal damnation. We have a much more optimistic view of the created realm. We focus a lot less on Jesus’ death and much more on his incarnation and resurrection. We celebrate that Jesus was born into a fully human body, and was resurrected into one. We have a much more positive view of embodiment.

I did speak to reporter Ed Stannard on Thursday. Before our call, I prepared some comments. Here’s what I wrote:

Graham and others like him often say something like, “Christians believe *this*.” Unfortunately, theirs is generally the default perspective presented in the media. In fact, it’s more correct to say, “Some Christians believe *this*, and some Christians believe *that*, and some Christians believe *the other*.” I want to make sure that people hear another Christian perspective.

Jesus never said anything about committed same-sex relationships. The few Biblical passages held up as condemning committed same-sex relationships are completely removed from their cultural context and therefore irrelevant. Over the last fifty years, there has been plenty of work done on this subject, including serious Biblical and theological scholarship.

Having settled the question of full inclusion of LGBT+ people, churches like mine are much more concerned with things like racial justice and climate justice and immigrant justice and food justice. Those are things about which the Bible has a whole lot to say for our current cultural context.

For Easter and the weeks following, many Churches hear gospel lessons from the Gospel of John. In chapter 13 of the Gospel of John, Jesus says this: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

A person *can* be both LGBT+ *and* a faithful Christian. There are MANY churches in Connecticut that are fully welcoming and affirming of LGBT+ people. We celebrate same-sex marriages and we baptize the children of same-sex couples. That message is especially important for LGBTQ+ people and their families and friends. And to LGBTQ+ people, I want to say this: God loves you; you are lovable. Your sexuality is a gift from God. Your embodiedness is a gift from God. Don't listen to anyone who says otherwise.

By the time we spoke, Ed said he'd been able to talk to many more opponents than supporters of Franklin Graham and had little room left in the story. So what I said to him was only the last few sentences.⁴ Still, though I had to pare way down, preparing those comments was a useful exercise.

Ed's article came out this morning. It describes the organizers as saying that Graham is bringing a message of hope. Hope is a powerful and important message, and, to be honest, Christians like us aren't particularly good at bringing it. There are still a lot of people who don't know that Christians like us even exist. We have to speak up—for their sake and for ours.

I think we can get better, and I encourage you to try. So here's your homework: Choose an issue that is important to you and imagine talking to a reporter about it. Answer this question: How does your faith, and how does your community of faith, inform your perspective? Write it down in preparation for speaking up.

Notes

¹ ““Boy Erased” Tells the True Story of Garrard Conley and Conversion Therapy,” an episode of *Now This*, November 9, 2018, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziUsIe4YPy0> (accessed May 11, 2019).

² Lewis R. Donelson, “Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

³ Kyle Swenson, “‘Not something to be flaunted, praised or politicized’: Franklin Graham blasts Buttigieg for being gay,” *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2019, available online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/04/25/not-something-be-flaunted-praised-or-politicized-franklin-graham-blasts-buttigieg-being-gay/?utm_term=.d2e0b4c863dd (accessed May 11, 2019).

⁴ Ed Stannard, “Franklin Graham tour bringing gospel, anti-LGBTQ message, controversy to CT,” *New Haven Register*, May 12, 2019, available online at <https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/Franklin-Graham-tour-bringing-gospel-anti-LGBTQ-13835994.php> (accessed May 12, 2019).