

A few months ago, I watched Hannah Gadsby's comedy special *Nanette* on a warm July afternoon.

If you've seen it, you know that "comedy special" isn't really the best way to describe it. It's part stand-up comedy, but it's also social commentary, a monologue, and Gadsby's self-reflection on her decision to quit being a comedian.

It's also full of stories about what it's like being a butch lesbian in the world. Or, as Gadsby describes it in her own terms, what it's like to live in the world as someone who is "gender not-normal."

My LGBTQ friends, particularly my butch lesbian friends, and I talked about it for months. But there's one moment in *Nanette* that has stuck in my mind since then and refused to get out.

In this scene, Gadsby is describing a moment where she is shopping with her mother, and all of the sudden, her mother turns to her and says "I'm Sorry."

"I'm sorry," her mother says. "The thing I regret is that I raised you as if you were straight ... I knew well before you did, that your life was going to be so hard. I knew that, and I wanted, more than anything in the world, for that not to be the case. And now I know that I made it worse. I made it worse because I wanted you to change, because I knew that the world wouldn't."

If you're an LGBTQ person, or a parent of any sort of kid, those words probably resonate with some aspect of your own experience. And we could probably unpack them for hours. But I bring them up this morning, on Pride Sunday, because I think they help shed light on our Gospel reading this morning.

Our reading from Mark today starts on a good note. Jesus asks his disciples who the people are saying he is. And after reporting on what they've heard, he asks the disciples,

"Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter gets it right! He correctly identifies Jesus as the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah who is to save Israel and free it from occupation at the hands of the Romans.

But then, things go south quickly. Jesus tells the disciples that the Christ must be rejected, must suffer, and then will die. And Peter can't believe this, so he says that this cannot be the case.

And in response, Jesus responds harshly: “Get behind me, Satan!” he says to Peter, calling one of his closest friends by the name of his worst enemy.

Peter is a good Jew. He knows who the Christ is supposed to be, and what the Christ is supposed to do. He’s supposed to save Israel, and deliver the people from the rule of the Romans, their oppressors.

The scribes, the elders, and the chief priests – the leaders of the people – are supposed to recognize him! They, too, as good Jews who have been waiting for this moment, are supposed to rejoice in his coming!

The Messiah is supposed to take down the Romans, not be killed by them! This is what has been prophesied, and what all of the Jewish people are hoping for.

And Peter believes he is acting rightly, when he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. His entire life of religious education and training backs him up on this point. He just correctly identified the Christ, the Messiah! He knows what the Christ is supposed to do, and Jesus just has it wrong.

But Jesus rebukes him, as Jesus has rebuked demons before. “Get behind me, Satan,” he says, as if to exorcise this disciple. It’s a low blow to Peter. But what comes next helps to unlock the whole of this difficult passage:

“For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on human things.”

In other words, “You are letting your own ideas of how things are supposed to be get in the way of following me.”

And then Jesus goes straight into talking about what it means to follow him.

The Greek of Jesus’s speech is a bit more active than our English translation today. A more accurate rendition would be something like: “If, from this point on, someone wishes to follow me... then let them take up their cross and follow me.”

Jesus is telling us exactly what we must do to be disciples.

Now, if you’ve been around church for any amount of time, you know that this passage has been used in thousands of harmful ways:

“Deny yourself” has often been interpreted to mean:

-Women, deny your desire to speak and lead and remain silent and subservient to men

-Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people: deny your love and attraction for people of the same gender and change to be straight. If you can’t change, be celibate.

-Transgender and genderqueer people: deny your true gender identity and force yourself to live into the expectations of the gender you were assigned at birth

-Black and brown people: deny your righteous anger at living in a racist and unjust society, and stay in your place.

I could go on, probably for days. And I’m guessing that some of you in the congregation today may have been hurt by this specific passage, by leaders who got it wrong, or who used their power to lead you astray. That breaks my heart, and it should break all of ours.

But that’s not what Jesus calls us to. Jesus tells us what denying yourself is: “setting your mind on the things of God and not on human things.” And, as our presiding bishop Michael Curry likes to say, “the way of Jesus, the way of God, is the way of love.”

Jesus calls us to love, to love God, each other, and ourselves. After all, these are the greatest commandments. And this is hard work, because, in the words of 1 Corinthians 13, “love does not insist on its own way,” but yields to the way of the beloved.

“Deny yourself,” means to live in the way of true, Christ-centered love, for yourself and everyone you meet. It’s not about hating yourself, or working to erase those parts of yourself that make you unique. It’s about seeking God’s ways, and not human ways.

But this brings us to crosses.

This is another aspect of the passage that has been often misused. It’s been used to subjugate minority peoples – to erase the difficulties that come with being “not-normal” and “different.” To give just two examples:

Gay and lesbian people: your cross is your sexuality, and the suffering that comes with it.

Trans and genderqueer people: your cross is feeling and knowing that your gender assigned at birth isn’t right.

That's the way I used to think about it. Even after I realized that someone could be gay and Christian, even after I realized I was a lesbian, I thought that God was in the business of handing out crosses when God made people who were, in Gadsby's words, gender or sexuality "not normal."

My thinking on this passage changed a few years ago, when I saw a Twitter conversation between two queer Episcopal priests, Broderick Greer and Winnie Varghese. In their comments, they held strongly to the idea that God doesn't give out crosses; the world does.

And this blew my mind.

I was used to interpretations of this passage, as you might be, that assumed God was handing out suffering and execution. God was giving people crosses when they were gay, or genderqueer, or not white, or any other oppressed category.

But this conversation helped me to see that the cross is the world's response to this way of love that God calls us to.

As Father Greer tweeted, "being gay isn't my cross; homophobia is. Being black isn't my cross; white supremacy is."

God isn't giving us crosses in our identities. Who we are isn't the source of our crosses.

But God calls all of us to follow Jesus, to take up the way of love, and to live in a way that's in opposition to the way things work in the world right now.

The way of the cross that Jesus shows us and calls us to, is the love of the mistreated, abused, and forgotten. It's the love of the weak, the powerless, and the downtrodden.

It is "love that has courage and faces down oppressive violence and refuses to recant." This is the way of love that does not give up.

It is the love that stares evil and injustice in the face, and does not back down, but says "this is not okay."

It is not okay that the rich trample on the poor. It is not okay that some people are oppressed because of their sexualities and gender identities. It is not okay that white supremacy reigns in this country, that parents are separated from children, that citizenship is being stripped from Latinx people because of their race."

And this love goes beyond calling out injustice, but it means doing something about it. This love compels us to put our comfort, our safety, and our bodies on the line, as Jesus did in the face of the Roman Empire.

This love demands the way of the cross, because it is contrary to the way the powerful, the rich, and the mighty expect things to go. The way of love is the way of the cross because it demands the opposite of the way things work now. And oppression is not overcome without a fight.

This way of the cross is also the way of deep trust in God. It trusts God's ways, and not our own. It puts aside our own expectations, our own ideas of how things should be and what we should do.

This is the self-denial to which we are called. To give up our own expectations, and to listen to God.

To give up our desire for comfort, for things to be easy.

To trust God to do the impossible, to silence those voices in our head that say our actions could never make a difference.

And to take risks.

I hope you know, that the call to "deny yourself, take up a cross, and follow Jesus," is really a call to hope and action.

It's a call to hoping things can be different and then doing something about it. And trusting that God is with us, remaking the world.

And this brings me again to Pride Sunday, and to that quote from *Nanette* that I started with.

Because as much as I get Gasby's mother's point, that she wanted her daughter to change because she knew the world wouldn't, the Gospel for today calls us to just the opposite.

To commit fully to the way of love, to God's ways, and to not back down in the face of the world's opposition and resistance.

To recognize that it's hard, and to do it anyway. Because we trust in God who has promised to change the world, and we know that our God is faithful and keeps those promises.

On a smaller scale, this is also what Pride is about: it's about love not backing down in the face of resistance and hate, but existing nonetheless, in spite of opposition.

And trusting in love to change the world.

Happy Pride, beloveds.

Take up your crosses, deny yourselves, and follow Jesus. Live into the way of love, expect resistance, and trust in God who is making all things new.