



Pure Imagination: World AIDS Day, and How Willie Wonka Taught Me About the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth

Kenny Pierce | Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Sacramento | Posted November 30, 2024

Tomorrow is the first Sunday of Advent, and it is also World AIDS Day. What follows below is a long reflection that I delivered on this same Advent Sunday at Christ Church Cathedral in Vancouver, BC in 2018. I had just lost my mother to cancer a year earlier and my brother to a fluke accident two months prior, and I was reeling both spiritually and emotionally. Our task in this reflection series was to answer this advent question: "What are you waiting for?" My answer was rooted in the ancient question "where is God in this pain" (or stated another way, "why does God let bad things happen to good people?"). It is a question of theodicy that I was grappling with that winter.

That First Sunday coincided with World AIDS Day, and our task called upon me to reflect back on the horrors of my 20s and 30s to make sense of the pain that a generation experienced and for me, to open my eyes to the presence of God in that suffering. I wrapped it all around a song that I particularly love, one from the first film that my father took me to see, for my 7th birthday in August of 1971.

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By Kenny Pierce

First Sunday in Advent Testimony

December 2, 2018, Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver, BC

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Our gospel on this first Sunday in Advent is set in a larger context of Jesus' foretelling of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. In the Jewish context of the day, this was a scary prospect because it means the devastating loss of their central place of worship and identity. In this story, Jesus speaks of signs in the moon and stars and the skies to foretell his return. He speaks of distress among nations, and of the roaring of waves in the sea, and after the temple was destroyed, people were asking "Where is he? When is the Son of Man coming back?"

"Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Over 2000 years later, it's safe to say that we're still asking that question. Where is the Son of Man? We wait for some sign, for some answer, some indication that we aren't speaking to empty air. All the while, we hear news about a changing climate. Forced deportations. Migrant caravans. Marginalization of our Indigenous people. Discrimination and violence against members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Disregard for the homeless or those losing their lives daily to addiction in our own local community. The list goes on.

We are a people waiting for some sign that Jesus hasn't forgotten his promise to come back to us, while we bear the worst that the world can throw at us.

Now, to shift gears a bit and at the risk of betraying my age, I wonder how many here have ever seen a movie from the early 70s called "Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory?"

Willie Wonka was the first film that I ever saw in a movie theater. My Dad took me to see it for my 7th birthday in 1971. I remember being pretty amazed at the spectacle of a factory with rivers of flowing chocolate, candy that you could pull from trees, roads paved in licorice, and on and on.

In the movie, we have an impoverished boy named Charlie who miraculously wins a golden ticket that earns him a rare inside glimpse at a chocolate factory. Charlie is an unlikely hero who lands in a world that doesn't seem to really be designed for people like him. His world was very much like my own to my 7-year-old eyes, which was probably why I liked his character so much.

In the movie, there was one particularly beautiful song that stayed with me. I loved it the moment that I first heard it and it became a favourite as I was growing up. It was called "[Pure Imagination](#)." How many of you know the scene or that song? As Mr. Wonka introduces this world of wonder with his magical words "we are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams." He then proceeds to open a huge set of doors that lead to another world, and all eyes are opened to unbelievable wonders.

As this display was unfolding for these gobsmacked kids, there was one line in the song that really grabbed and has stayed with me over the years:

"If you want to view Paradise, simply look around and view it."

With this line in particular, I've come to believe that Mr. Wonka challenges the kids to open their eyes to the more. To the beauty around them. To what is within them that is unseen and untapped. To open their eyes to a bit of paradise staring back at them in disguise.

"If you want to view Paradise, simply look around and view it."

Yesterday, we celebrated the 30th annual World AIDS Day remembrance and I was thinking about my memories of the earliest days of the pandemic, and of this theme of opening our eyes to what is around us.

In 1981, I was 17 years old and working in my uncle's pharmacy in Southern California when I first heard someone speak of a new disease that seemed to be targeting gay men, hemophiliacs, and intravenous

drug users. To my naïve worldview at the time, this was transpiring in a far-off world in my eyes and wasn't affecting me yet.

Four years later, I came out to someone. It was 1985 and the HIV virus had just been identified, and a test made available. Those letters would come to forever play like a bitter sonnet against every aspect of my world. So many around me were growing sick and dying as I left the church that condemned us, and as I emerged into a very secular gay community. It's hard to underscore just how profoundly that backdrop affected me and so many others in that time and how much it haunts so many of us who survived to this day.

I'm not sure that a 17 or a 21-year-old is ever equipped to weather that magnitude of loss and pain. The "where is God" was on many of our lips at the time.

What were we waiting for then? A cure, first and foremost. Or absent that, maybe a reprieve in the form of treatment. Yes, the ability to marry and to have legal rights would have been nice. But first and foremost, we were fighting a war of our own, and our very survival, our very lives, was our first priority.

Year after year, the losses mounted as we lost those most precious to us. As is true in our darkest periods, it was so easy to slip into despair in that era. For those who still kept their faith or spiritual bearings, prayers often seemingly went unanswered. We looked for signs that we hadn't been abandoned by God amidst the cries of it all being "God's retribution" by the religious of that day. Many who did survive found it easier to believe that any sort of God was completely absent than to believe that a loving God could remain silent amidst the suffering and broad apathy and antagonism that we were experiencing.

"If you want to view paradise, simply look around and view it?" Really? Where was paradise in any of this? Where could God possibly be found in our pain?

What I see in hindsight, what I learned about the Kingdom of Heaven in that time, was a lesson formed on the back of adversity that stays with me to this day. Something in our community took over. Something that looked a lot like "dying unto ourselves" – that staple phrase in Christianity. I don't know that I really understood what it meant at the time but in hindsight, I began to witness something profound. People with nowhere else to turn began to lift their fallen brothers and sisters in a myriad of ways. It stopped being so much about the survival of self, and more about doing whatever you could for those in need around you.

Amidst the lesions and bedsores bourn by the weak and dying, there was a rise in activism and volunteerism. There were people donating food and clothing, marching in parades, advocating for research and care. Programs emerged to provide social, spiritual, financial, emotional, and medical support for those stricken in our community. Though the victims of the plague in the LGBTQ+ community were disproportionately gay men and transgender women, there was a coalescing of the broader member of the LGBTQ+ community. It was like something that I'd never seen before, but couldn't unsee once I had.

This was nothing less than holiness.

This was the spirit of Jesus alive and well and at work. And it was that spirit where it is usually clearest and most alive: in the margins of society. Where the forgotten, where the cast aside are to be found, Jesus was there as he always has been and always will be. He was ministering to the sick and galvanizing a community, all while we were asking when he was going to show up. Our eyes were often closed to the wonder of God's grace working through us amidst the pain, but that lesson about the kingdom among us is what stays with me now, as I look back at it all from my 54th year.

"If you want to view Paradise, simply look around and view it."

It is easy to see the presence of the divine amidst the joys in life, but in the pain, tragedy, and despair in life – what of that?

When the planes hit the buildings on September 11, 2001, we asked where God was when the buildings came down and so many lives were horrifically lost. But I wonder if we saw God in the way that people put aside differences and extended kindnesses in New York to one another.

During Hurricane Katrina when people were drowning in their own homes, there were cries of "how long O Lord." Yet people to the left and right of the ideological spectrum set aside differences and worked together at the ground level to provide shelter and safety. God was alive and well, though somewhat in disguise.

When neo-Nazis plowed into a crowd and killed a girl at a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia last year, so many were given to despair over the rise of this dark Fascist spirit overtaking our current climate. And yet here in Vancouver, 4000 people (many from our own Cathedral community) gathered in a show of solidarity for those protesting this rising evil in the world. I was there, and I recognized the spirit at work immediately.

If you want to view Paradise, simply look around and view it.

More personally, over the past year and 1/2, I found myself asking the "where is God" question in the wake of my mother's cancer diagnosis and passing. My despair reached its pinnacle last month when my younger brother was killed in a fluke accident. I have to confess that I have struggled not only with my own belief that God was really present, but with the value of prayer. This all in spite of those lessons from the darkest of my formative years learned in the AIDS pandemic. I should have known better.

So where was God? God was in this beautiful Cathedral community, and in my friends at St. Andrews-Wesley United Church. God was in the persistent outpourings of messages, texts, and calls. God was with Marnie who bore the difficult task of calling and holding space for me 5 minutes after I got the news that Mom had cancer, 5 minutes after she passed away 6 months later, and again, 5 minutes after my brother breathed his last and I thought that I'd lose my mind with grief.

God was in the groundswell of love showed to my family in all of this. In dinners cooked, gatherings organized, check-ins, and ears lent to our cries of "why" with no answers, but with the ready gift of time. This spirit held us and continues to hold us and you know, again, there is something profoundly holy that transpires amidst the pain that transcends the question of "why" as we wait for Christ in our most painful

moments. In our pain and despair, I've come to believe that we often fail to see the Kingdom of Heaven in our midst.

If you want to view Paradise, simply look around and view it.

On this first Sunday of Advent, I would like to challenge us as a community to really open our eyes to God in our midst. Instead of waiting for Christ's arrival, I challenge us to recognize Christ in the unlikeliest of places. Mr. Wonka opened the door to a wonderful world for me when I was only 7. As hard as it is to do amidst the mundane in life – in our work, our errands, the daily commute, etc., and especially in our darker seasons where we struggle with grief and loss, I wonder if we can try to open our eyes to this same world. I wonder if we can try to see through our pain to behold a bit of Paradise in the small moments that aren't so obvious to us.

Christ tells us today that as in the sprouting of the leaves of the fig tree, we'll know that the kingdom of God is near. As we wait for the birth of our redeemer in this season, I dearly hope that we learn to look for the sprouts that give way to this kingdom on earth and remember the wise words from Mr. Wonka, what I now see as a lesson about the kingdom of heaven on earth. Words about what we can be to one another in both good times and in our pain.

His words in their original context from the 1873 poem "Ode" by Arthur O'Shaughnessy:

We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems.