

August 23, 2026 - Trinity Episcopal Church - Pride Sunday - 13th Sunday

After Pentecost, Year A

Theo Patterson

“God of the rainbow, remind us this morning of why we stay. Amen”

Most of us in this sanctuary today are familiar with someone or something that “yanks us back.” Maybe it’s a difficult relative, a place, or an old pattern that no matter how many years seem to go by, or how much work you put in, yanks you back right to where you used to be. A few weeks ago, I had an experience that “yanked me back” that I’d like to share with you this morning.

At the end of July, my friends and I took a camping trip to the Redwoods and had a wonderful time hiking, swimming, and spending some great quality time around the campfire. It was deeply restorative. On the last day of the trip, a few of us made an extra stop on our way home at an evangelical Christian retreat center and summer camp that was nearby that my friend Allie used to work at. I had never been to this specific camp before, but because I grew up in the Evangelical church, I knew the drill on what to expect. After driving through and seeing the highlights, we parked and wandered into the camp bookstore and gift shop. And for me, stepping through that door was like stepping through a Time Machine: immediately and viscerally yanked back.

There were kitschy wall art pieces plastered with Bible verses. There were “man of God” leather-bound journals and “woman of God” flowery planners. There were shelves and

shelves of books on how to live the kind of life that was pedestaled by the white evangelical imagination. And my personal favorite: a tiny pocket-sized tract near the checkout with a comprehensive list of the exact specifics you needed to look out for to know that the end times had for sure arrived. It felt like walking into a microcosm of the entire universe of my child and teen years. When I encounter expressions of Christianity that are less than inclusive for LGBTQ+ people like myself, I find myself reacting with not only frustration, but a strong desire to distance myself from those expressions as much as possible. Hence, why, when I entered this bookstore, a question popped into my head without warning: “Why am I even still a Christian at all?”

It is a question that possibly many of us are familiar with in an era where White Christian Nationalism has marched onto center stage, and being outed as “Christian” is often synonymous with hatred and bigotry. Our faith tradition in the broadest sense has done much harm, and for many in the queer community, this harm is not abstract or historical, but deeply personal, present, and painful. Somewhat ironically, I had brought today’s lectionary passages with me on this trip and had spent some time meditating on them in the woods to prepare. But it wasn’t until after this experience at the end of the trip that the texts seemed to sharpen with clarity, providing responses to my question with three guiding lights. Why do I, as a gay man, hurt by Christianity and the church, stay a Christian at all? When I asked this question, the Isaiah text spoke back to me: because God remained faithful as your ancestors fought for you. The Epistle whispered: because your church family has a rainbow of gifts. And the gospel proclaimed: because you are committed to your loving Lord Jesus.

In today's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Isaiah addresses Israel with a call to remember God's covenant faithfulness in the past as they wait for deliverance. This prophetic call goes out amidst the looming threat of violence from the Assyrian Empire: "Look to the rock from which you were hewn" the prophet writes. Remember. Remember Abraham and Sarah. Remember how I blessed them. Remember the quarry from which you were dug. To the ears of the people of Judah, this charge to remember their ancestors who left everything to trust God and fight for a new future was meant to be a hopeful and grounding charge. Don't give up just because times are tough, remember how far you and your people have come. This text also rang true for me today: the prophet's call to remember your ancestors and the poignant use of such an earthen metaphor immediately brought to my mind the 1969 Stonewall Riots.

On the infamous night of June 28, 1969, the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York City was raided by cops. Stonewall was a bar known as a haven for some of the most marginalized members of the queer community in the area at the time: including drag queens, trans folk, and homeless youth, many of whom were people of color. When the cops arrived, they attempted to forcibly identify and arrest those expected of "crossdressing" by stripping them in the back of the bar. When some of these folks were dragged out in handcuffs to waiting wagons on the curb, panic ensued. The crowd revolted, launching themselves at the cops, who barricaded themselves inside the bar with a few hostages under a barrage of bricks, bottles, and other paraphernalia. Every year since, LGBTQ+ communities have celebrated Pride during the month of June, not because we are arrogant, but because we honor and commemorate our ancestors who had the courage to stand up for their own dignity against a militarized culture of

oppression. Seven years after the Stonewall Riots, The Episcopal Church general convention passed a resolution declaring that “homosexual people are Children of God, with a full and equal claim upon the church’s love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care.” We are celebrating the 50th anniversary of this FULL and EQUAL resolution this September! Remember your ancestors. Remember how far you have come. As Episcopalians, we not only have the gift of God’s faithfulness in the rich legacy of Abraham and Sarah to look back on, but we also have a half-century of our denominational predecessors fighting alongside others in pursuit of this promise: full and equal dignity for everyone. Stay because of God’s faithfulness and your ancestors’ sacrifices for you to be where you are today.

When I set foot in Trinity’s sanctuary in 2023, it was the first time in my life where I had ever seen out queer people in a place of faith. For my entire life until then, I had missed the fullness of life that queer people can bring to a church space. You have no idea how powerful that was for me. It cannot be just our ancestors who bring us the strength to keep the faith, we need our church family too. When Paul writes to the Christians in Rome in the first century CE, he exhorts them to recognize and celebrate the gifts that each member brings to the body. This is not meant to be taken as a competition or a checklist, Paul specifically calls for humility when we identify our gifts and the gifts of our siblings in Christ. But it would be heartbreaking to think of all that is lost when a community does not recognize or celebrate the full range of gifts brought by the full range of human and spiritual diversity. One of my favorite reframing exercises that Rev. Elizabeth has shared with me is called: “what will we gain?” When a community is changing, the temptation is often to immediately name which people will leave, which

donors will dry up, and which old-timers will dig their heels in the hardest. Instead of this, we can shift from scarcity thinking to an abundance mentality. When we include everyone, what new partnerships will be born? Who will walk through our doors now that they are open wider? Who will find hope that they had never dreamed possible? I know I found a taste of that hope when I saw who was in this Sanctuary. I experienced healing when I felt the ripple effect of LGBTQ+ folks bringing their full gifts to the life of the church: not only in attendance, but in authentic service and meaningful leadership. Look to the queer people on your right and left in the sanctuary today. These are your brothers, sisters, siblings in Christ, who have rainbows of gifts to offer, and who make our community that much more vibrant and strong with their presence. And if you yourself are a part of the LGBTQ+ community, let me tell you how much the church needs you. We need your beautiful love to radiate out and remind us of our beautiful God. You are not alone in your church hurt or your spiritual pain, but stay, because we are here together seeking healing and sharing our gifts with those who will receive us with open arms.

The final guiding light that glowed through today's scripture readings for me was perhaps the brightest. And that is Jesus. In the gospel text today, we encounter an exchange between Peter and Jesus where Peter confesses his faith and Jesus gives him spiritual authority as a leader of the apostles. In the Episcopal Church, we share an apostolic connection to this papal lineage, proceeding from Peter, through the Archbishop of Canterbury. We also confess a beautiful Baptismal Covenant that commits us to Jesus and his church. Whether you resonate more with an unending procession or an ongoing confession, behind both readings is the same thing: a real

encounter with Jesus. And I am convinced that the more you truly get to know and love Jesus, the more you will be captivated by just how amazing he is. But here's the catch, I'm not talking about the white-skinned, blonde-haired, and blue-eyed Jesus who you could find for sale on a bookmark in the bookstore I was in. I'm talking about the brown skinned, colonized brother who would flip tables if he set foot in that bookstore. I'm talking about the maybe asexual Jesus who definitely had a queer family of origin story. The Jesus who was so marginalized that the Stonewall Inn on the night of that police raid would've been his usual hang if he had been born in mid-century America and not Roman Palestine. The Jesus who walked out of the church with every hurt LGBTQ+ person. The Jesus who protected and preserved the trans kid who barely survived when the people who claimed to follow him told the kid that it was necessary to detransition or go to hell.

I'm talking about the real Jesus, whose spirit I feel when Becky and Holly sing. The real Jesus who I glimpse in Lucy's mural. Who guides Grace when he conducts the choir. The Jesus whose presence is carried by Kenny's paten and chalice at Eucharist, whose voice leads through Michelle in Vestry meetings, and whose warmth fills the Fireside Room designed by Stephen. Jesus, who is at the table when we eat the cookies baked by Claude, who is in the trenches with Mark fixing the flooding in the Children and Youth building. Our loving Lord, who whispers through Kristina's reflections at Youth Group and who encourages Shawn and Carola to pick up extra snacks for said Youth Group. This Jesus is the one who blessed Max to offer me tickets to a drag show, who silently joined Billy and Randall's facilitated Labyrinth walk, who I catch a glimpse of every time Matt scoops up little Owen in the nursery, AND THE JESUS I KNOW TO BE HERE

WHEN EVERY OTHER QUEER PERSON IN OUR COMMUNITY SHINES THE LIGHT OF THEIR GOD-GIVEN GIFTS. I stay because Jesus stayed with me, and I love him enough to stay with his people.

When I walked out of the bookstore at that evangelical camp, I had not resolved all my hesitations with Christianity. But I did know why I'm still here. I was so proud of myself for not letting the old systems of high control religion dictate my life, health, and love. I walked outside with my friends and I smiled, knowing that the God who fully knows and loves me for all of my rainbow self was not contained in the tight space of that small dim bookshop. The resplendent light was cascading red off the bark of the trees, like the blood shed by our ancestors fighting for equality. It bounced orange off the dried leaves on the forest floor, reminding me of those who had gone to the Lord never knowing the freedoms I now know. Bright yellow sparkles danced off a small pond, radiating with the intersecting ripples of shared life and chosen family. The deep green of the living boughs above asking what new growth will be gained when everyone flourishes. And beyond that, the blue sky wide above, a gift of space for healing from past tiny spaces. And popping up from the soil with resurrection life, the bright purple of lupines, a royal reminder that our Lord Jesus will always stick by our side, through the dark of the soil, and into the daylight of the first new sprouts. Amen.

