Coming Out
By: TJ Williams - Hauger

When I think about my coming out story, I can’t tell it without talking about my parents, the community I grew up in, Youngstown, Ohio, and the Youngstown Baptist Church community. I wanted to be a part of it because they had more activities for me to do as a teenager. In talking about my coming out story, I also must highlight the work we must do so that others can find safety in their communities and within their families.

I grew up in a progressive, liberal family that was a part of conservative denominations. My mom was one of the women ordained as an Evangelist within the Church of God and Christ. Christ Cathedral in Columbus, Ohio, was her ordaining church. Dad owned a barber shop and a grocery store. Both were freedom riders who stood up against racism and promoted the Civil Rights movement. Socially, they loved to dress up, go to clubs and dance together. They were also committed to registering people to vote. Mother and father were my adopted parents, but I didn’t know this until I was 19 years old.

Their ideas about equality and justice were not expressed by the greater denomination so I thought they and my family were strange people. By the time I entered my teens, I went to a white conservative evangelical church because their youth group was bigger, but I didn’t know that they were teaching intentionality by conforming to their Christian values and loving Jesus which for them were closely connected. While my parents were intentional about telling me that God's creation and love expands to all people whether they are gay or black. They also believed justice for gay folks is equal to justice for everybody.

African Americans are still fighting for their civil rights, but I still struggled to be honest with myself about my sexual identity, the identity of my blackness because that is what the violence of white supremacy, theology and its ideology does to break down and control the black race. It makes you deny all of who you are while at the same time learning how to oppress others. That brings a long-term effect of the connection between white supremacists’ geology, apathy, and ignorance of homophobia. The white evangelical church called Youngstown Baptist Church espoused and embodied both the theology of slave owners as the abuser and the ideology of abuse toward lesbian folks. Yes, my mama was right because she told me the Jesus of the black church is rooted in civil rights stands for justice and is for the people. However, the Jesus represented in the white conservative evangelicalism is not about service, or justice, but it’s about bondage.
My journey to reconciliation with my faith and sexuality with another peer told me that I cannot run from God as I can turn away from the parishioners in church buildings who won’t accept me as a gay man. However, I can’t ever turn away from a God who doesn’t turn away from me. My peer helped me process my coming out and it even led me to ignore the lies, homophobia and racism coming from the parishioners and pastors at the Youngstown Baptist Church.

What also helped me was searching through biblical texts. I remembered that my mother used to say that “one has to work out salvation for their own self.” Therefore, one of the anchor scriptures that grounded me in my coming out journey was found in Psalm chapter 139: vs 13-15:

_For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful. I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was laid in a secret place when I was woven together in the depths of the earth._

_Luke chapter 12: vs 6-7:_

_Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? And even the very hairs of your head are numbered. Fear not therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows._

So, this God who created me and who created all of us knew us before there was even our physical imprint on this Earth. He knew every hair on our heads and every breath that we breathe is the breath of God. So of course, God would know our sexual identities because just like he created every hair on our heads, he created the connection we feel between one another. God knows who we would unite with in union and how we would express ourselves in terms of sexual identity.

My coming out moment was when I was scheduled to be on a television show for my local TV station about homophobia and coming out as a gay man. Everyone had seen the interview and the pastor of the conservative white evangelical church asked me to lie, and I said I was not going to do that to hide myself in shame! I walked out of that church to never return again but walked out with the confidence of knowing that I am a child of God made in his image who knew my name and every hair on my head. After
that, I now see and understand the responsibility to build and support sustainable communities where everyone can be safe, be free and live with liberty and happiness.

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