

I was raised in the Bible Belt. Everything was generally just a lot more Jesus-y down there. Sure, we had more “Repent or Else” billboards, and when you met someone for the first time, one of the first questions they’d inevitably ask was “What church do you go to?” See, it was assumed that you had a church, and if you didn’t, why, you’d get invited to a potluck and a Wednesday night full of preaching and fellowship. Now most folks didn’t know what an Episcopalian was, but if they had heard of us, they usually didn’t know much. So, every “I’m an Episcopalian” conversation inevitably led to questions, which inevitably led to responses that said a lot more about the person asking ‘em than it did about us. When explaining our faith, the scripture-only folks didn’t like the three-legged stool with its Tradition and Reason in the mix. How we read scripture also tended to go over poorly. And how we live out our faith led to some serious pearl-clutching. Our Catechism, resolutions passed by General Convention, quotes from theological minds recent and ancient alike, all were grounds for judgement.

I don’t wanna give the impression that we’re the ones that’re most right, but I’ve certainly been told we’re the ones that are most wrong. In my days as a priest, I’ve spoken on state capitol steps, marched in Pride, and protested for responsible gun legislation. I’ve been interviewed on TV, radio, and podcasts, and my words have found their way to people I never imagined. And as a result, I’ve been yelled at by protestors, spat at in the streets of my hometown, followed to the county line by a truckload full up with the KKK. I even got death threats while I was in Little Rock. And you know who did all that to this Christian priest? Other Christians. There’s a tongue-in-cheek line that says: “there’s no hate quite like Christian love.” That’s what being the wrong kind of Christian in the Bible Belt was like. Even members of my family are ashamed of my ministry. When I marched and spoke at the first Pride event in my hometown, one relative was so embarrassed he wouldn’t go out in public until the hubbub died down ‘cause he didn’t want to face the shame of being associated with me.

But it’s not all like that. I can’t tell you how much it means to other people to see or read or hear what I’ve said and done. But it’s not me they appreciate. It’s that a priest of the Church cares about them enough to show up with a message of actual love. Just to be clear, I’m not telling y’all any of this to brag. It didn’t matter that it was me at all. It mattered that it was anyone. When I washed feet on the steps of the Arkansas State Capitol, Christians yelled nasty things about why I wanted to see everybody’s feet while queer folks begging to get some of their rights back lined up and wept and hugged those helping me. When I spoke at that Pride event, a non-binary college student showed me the scars traced along the inside of their forearm that corresponded to the names of each church that’d hurt them. I was the only minister in their 20-some-odd years who’d ever told ‘em that God loved them. When I signed a statement decrying racial injustice, I received angry phone calls from as far away as Utica, but only one call was a gift. The caller was inspired to know there were still clergy around that cared, so maybe they’d write a statement for their own town.

See, I really don’t think any of that’s because The Rev. Brooks Cato was there. I think it was because The Rev. Anybody was there; it just so happened to be me. I’ve seen so many hurt souls tell so many Episcopalians -- clergy and laity alike -- “if I lived closer, I’d go to your church.” Whether they show up or not, it’s an affirmation that getting this Christian thing right touches hearts that desperately need love. Actually, it’s that “if I lived closer, I’d go to your church” that I want to talk about. Episcopalians make up less than 2% of the US population, and most of us are pretty quiet about it. As a rule, we aren’t a proselytizing bunch, which in many ways is a good thing. But so many people’ve heard so many Christians express their beliefs so loudly while we’re being quiet that few know what we’re about or that we exist at all. That there is a church whose calling is to love as freely as God does, that’s almost irresistible. People just don’t know that we offer a different

way. And people want a different way, even if they didn't know it before, they long for it, and our conversations, our actions, our risks give them permission to find it.

Ya know, I wonder. When Mary and Joseph take Jesus for his post-birth cleansing (thanks, patriarchy), there's a pair that catches my imagination. Simeon's just a guy, a good guy, but just a guy. He had a vision that he'd see Christ before he died, and sure enough, here Christ comes! Simeon knew what to look for because he'd been guided to it, and when he finally saw Christ, it drove him to poetry. But Anna's the more interesting to me. Simeon's words got recorded, but hers didn't (thanks again, patriarchy). All we know is that she was a prophet who recognized Jesus for who he was, but her story's a little different. Anna didn't have Simeon's advantage, but she'd studied and prayed and prepared for so long that she knew what to look for. Both longed for his arrival, and when he finally got there, both recognized him right away and rejoiced that Jesus was finally there. I wish we had Anna's words, but without them, Simeon's will have to do. There's a line of his I've somehow never seen before. I've been so taken with the words of his song that I missed the words of his blessing. Simeon says, "this child is destined ... to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." In other words, there's something about the Good News of Christ that's going to be good news to some and not to others. And for the latter, what is loving and kind, empathetic and open, hopeful and life-giving, for the latter, that's bad news. They'll oppose it, and opposing it openly reveals their inner thoughts. They're gonna say the quiet part out loud. We can disagree on all sorts of things, but the core message inviting us to love our neighbor remains. And if the call to love your neighbor makes you uncomfortable, it's not the call that should make you wonder; it's your discomfort with the call that should. If a sermon on mercy makes you spitting mad, you're probably showing more of your true self than you mean to. If your response to a tragedy is to balk at visiting the place it happened because you don't want to go swimming, well, you know where this leads.

I'd much rather look at this from the other direction, though. I'd much rather look for the hope. All those folks I mentioned earlier, the foot washers, the nonbinary student with scars named for churches, the maybe I'll come visit phone caller, I wonder if they're the Simeons and Annas of our day. The Simeons know they'll see goodness one day. And the Annas know what to look for. And they're all tied up with the ones who hope for goodness and know what to look for but have given up on ever finding it. And all of 'em know what Christianity is supposed to be. They've hoped and watched and know its failings intimately. And because of that, they're floored when they find out there's a place for people like them in Christianity if they want it, a place they didn't even know was possible, or hoped was possible but had that hope crushed out of them. There's more: the ones with no idea about any of this that can still recognize integrity when they see it. Since last week, I've gotten all sorts of messages from people with no desire to be Christian encouraging me to keep the faith. Jews, Muslims, some Christians, and more than a few atheists also told me to encourage you to keep up the good work. So, keep up the good work! Y'all, even folks who will never be Christian long to see Christians act like Christians. Like Simeon and Anna, they've been waiting for us to show up because when we do it right, we shake the world. So for now, show up. Show up as Christians and shake the world, and do it with Love.

I know we're all a little uncomfortable talking about Jesus. But the world desperately needs Christians to actually uphold Christianity, actually speak words of kindness and actually do acts of love. If we don't, the only thing of Christianity the world will know is how awful Christians are at following Christ. While Christianity could certainly use some good PR, we don't do this to make ourselves look good. We do this because people need God's love. Our world is so broken by hate that even the tiniest acts of love have become revolutionary, but a revolution of love is what the better parts of Christianity's been preaching for two thousand years. This isn't easy, but no one said being a Christian was easy. It can be dangerous, life-threatening, even. I'm not telling y'all to go out and be martyrs. Please, be careful. But also, be faithful, be honest, and be consistent as a follower

of Christ. We don't get to stop loving people because it's hard or inconvenient or illegal. Our love's growing more important by the day because fewer and fewer people know that love's even an option. Remind them. Remind them with every interaction, and I mean every single one, even the annoying, even the angry, even the threatening. Meet them all with love. That's our way, and it's been our way for a mighty long time. And for a mighty long time, Simeon and Anna and all the others've been waiting. So let's show them. 'Cause when we do it well, there really is no other love quite like Christian love. Show them. Remind them. And do it with that world-shaking, all-inclusive, long-awaited love.