

I suspect some of y'all have seen my post over on Nextdoor, but if you haven't, here's the situation. We've been flying that Pride flag out front for about a year. In that time, the Vestry's received only one complaint, an anonymous letter decrying the existence of trans people. Incidentally, we've also seen at least eight newcomers who decided to come to St. Thomas' because of that flag. Anyway, we've been flying it for around a year and, admittedly, it's gotten a little frayed around the edges. Madison Street is a windy place, and the cheapest flag I could find on the internet wasn't made for that kind of airish abuse. So, it's not been in great shape. But it has been flying as proud as it can. Has been, that is, until night-before-last. Perhaps to let us know it was time to get a nice new replacement, someone attempted to make off with the flag. But have no fear! A new one, of higher quality, is on its way.

The Pride flag has a long tradition. The first iteration was designed by a group of activists headed by Gilbert Baker in 1978. Baker was an artist and an army vet. He hand dyed and hand sewed that first flag, which included eight colors. Since then, the flag has undergone quite a few changes. For much of its history, the Pride flag was only six colors, and I gotta admit, from a purely aesthetic standpoint, that one's my favorite. But for some, that symbol of inclusion didn't feel like it included them, so the flag changed again. Philadelphia was the first to add brown and black stripes, emphasizing the unique struggles of queer people of color. The Progress flag then emerged to explicitly include trans folks with the rainbow and a black, brown, blue, pink, and white chevron. That brings us up to the flag we've been flying, the Progress flag with an additional triangle representing people who are intersex. For those that don't know, that just means people who are born with physical or genetic markers that don't fit the typical gender binary. This is not a new category, just a new name. Shoot the concept even shows up in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when Harper Lee describes an ambiguous wintertime creation as a "morphodite snowman." Same thing, different name.

Great, but why a visible symbol in the first place? Or, as I've heard it put more often than I'd like, why do they have to shove all this gay stuff down everybody else's throats? Well, to start, it's a symbol of unity. While the flag and alphabet soup abbreviations connect a whole bunch of different groups under one big queer umbrella, there's a huge amount of variation from one group or one individual to the next. There's a lot that isn't shared in common, but there's one thing in particular that is: the insufficient nature of society's strictly manufactured categories around human sexuality and gender. And as y'all are well aware, those that don't fit within society's categories live under constant threat of violence, abuse, insult, theft, damage of property, and on and on. Often, when those crimes get reported, they're downplayed or swept under the rug. The societal pressures and the dangers of just trying to live are so great on people within the community that suicide is a disturbingly high cause of death. And those same pressures exist on folks outside of the queer community, too, so heavily that queer folks -- especially trans women -- are murdered at higher rates than the rest of the population.

The flag represents unity of all those groups, but the point isn't just to say we've got a family that we got to choose. The point is to make our presence visible and to make the audacious claim that we deserve to live as much as anyone else. It doesn't matter what categories we're talking about, it doesn't matter how complicated the flag design gets. What matters is that, until queer folks are able to exist without fear, that flag is necessary. It has very little, if anything, to do with what you get up to in the bedroom, and everything to do with whether or not you can walk down the street holding your partner's hand without worrying what the person walking behind you's gonna do.

In other words, St. Thomas' hasn't been flying that flag to celebrate what happens behind closed doors. We've been flying that flag to celebrate what happens in front of God and everybody and to remind ourselves what happens when everybody but God turns a blind eye. So, for whoever stopped by St. Thomas' the other night, trying to remove our flag and then tearing it wasn't just an insult, it was a statement, a statement for us and the rest of the community that our tolerance, our acceptance, shoot even our glorification of queer people is not acceptable. Now, I've got a quote up in my office that says, "The Glory of God is the human person fully alive." A human person cannot be fully alive while the weight of society tells them they shouldn't be alive at all. And that's why we fly the flag. We want the queer community to know they are safe here while declaring that hatred is not welcome in God's house or in God's world.

In that Gospel reading, John describes the familiar story about Jesus the Good Shepherd. This is Sunday School 101. But there's a line buried in that story that always surprises me. Jesus is talking about how he's the way into the safety of the sheepfold, and then almost as an aside, he says, "I've got other sheep in other sheepfolds. I'll take care of them." He might as well say, "take care of yourself and don't worry about anyone else. I've got this." My Lord, do I wish more of us Christians thought that way. But I do love the ambiguity of that other sheepfold. I have no idea who it's for. I don't know who those sheep are, I don't even know if they're Christian. Admittedly, I'm a bit of a universalist, but I like to think of our sheepfold as followers of Christ, and that other sheepfold as sheep we'd never recognize on this side of the grave. Who knows, but I love that there's a place for my ambiguity to live, to be protected, to be held close by that Good Shepherd. I wish the whole world worked so generously. I wish we could just tell those we disagree with that there are plenty of sheepfolds for plenty different folks, and we all love whatever sacredness we find, so we don't need to worry about what you get up to 'cause there's room for everyone. I wish it was that easy. But it's not, and the world instead is full of sheepfolds burning down other sheepfolds. I wish it was as easy as putting a flag out front and saying, you'll be safe in this sheepfold. But it's not that easy. We've had a wolf on the loose, attempting to snatch and scatter the faithful. Or at least to tell us our sheepfold's caught their attention for all the wrong or very right reasons.

Now, I have heard a critique of our flag that came from a very different place. A queer friend extended their thanks to St. Thomas' for having the courage to fly those many colors, but they wondered if it was true. They wondered if the flag was actually bait with the doors of the church as the steel teeth of a trap waiting to spring. That friend has been stung by so many Christians that when they see the flag out front, their heart swirls with a terrible mixture of hope and fear. Hope that Christianity can change and fear that it never will. I've only heard that from one person, but boy do I get it. We can only tell folks what we believe so much. At some point, we gotta start showing them. That can look like a lot of things, but today, it starts with continuing to fly that battered, nearly stolen flag in defiance. It might look a little beat up, but it's still there by God. And if the messy sight disturbs you, lean in. Because that flag represents people, a people who themselves have been torn, beaten up, and battered, but still live the only way they can: defiant.

I know it's hard to be a group this big and not have some disagreements. I know not everyone thinks it's okay to be gay. In all honesty, I'd love to sit down with you and have a conversation about that, but for the moment, I hope we can agree on this: that no matter who you are, no one should have to live in constant fear under a shadow of menace. That is the Valley of the Shadow of Death. But St. Thomas'? We are a home for light and life and the gate of our sheepfold remains open. We are a home for God. And flag-tearing wolves be damned, we are a home for you.