

One.

Early last week, I made a pilgrimage to the Diocesan Office up in Liverpool. That's a trek I haven't made since before the pandemic. It felt a little like a homecoming, even though it's just a mostly empty suite in a boring office building. I went up there to spend some time in the archives, looking through old records on St. Thomas' and one or two on the history of our diocese. I pulled boxes off of shelves and filtered through dry journals of Diocesan Conventions going back to the 1830s. Some looked like they hadn't been touched since the day they were published, others crumbled at a glance.

Two.

I found some cool stuff in those pages, though. One was so neat that I gasped and hollered for the archivist to come and see. "It's not a mouse is it?" she asked. I suppose that would've been a more likely find than what the treasure turned out to be: a half-dozen Fall leaves pressed in the pages of a 120-year old journal! Hard and leathery and well-preserved delicate gems hidden in a book in a box on a shelf in a rarely-visited room of the most boring building you've ever seen. But I found other interesting things, too. For several years in the early 1900s, St. Thomas' regularly raised money for, somewhat vaguely, "The Jews." After years of uneasy tension, in 1867, St. Thomas' sent \$11 to "The South." I can't imagine either were easy tasks to undertake.

Three.

The Jews were scapegoats for much of their history, and St. Thomas' raising money to support whatever it is they were supporting couldn't have been an easy sell. And The South, well yes, they were our countrymen, and yes, we wanted them to recover, but also, so much suffering came at their hand. Again, I can't imagine the effort it must've taken to help the people who caused so much brokenness for so many, even all the way up here. Even then, as this morning's collect has it, St. Thomas' proclaimed God's truth with boldness and compassion. We supported unpopular causes because they were right and because they were necessary. Those Diocesan Journals go back a long way, and year over year, St. Thomas' made its love for humanity a priority. Far as I can tell, it had little to do with politics. It had to do with who needed it most right then.

Four.

As delighted as I was to find the pressed leaves and our generosity, in 1861 and 1862, I was disappointed by the bishop's addresses. He referred to the "perils which hang over our country" but stressed that "no political action was needed." His was a message of unity, of setting aside our differences, of everyone just getting along so that the country could come back together. Now, I'm not opposed to unity. But the unity called for then came at the expense of people suffering. The calls for unity put the concept of "unity" above the rights of enslaved people. "Unity" is a beautiful concept, but as members of a Body that emphasizes unity and bemoans brokenness, we gotta be careful here. We do not sacrifice unity for the cause of the day. But we absolutely cannot let calls for unity outweigh calls for human rights.

Five.

I know I've been up on a soapbox lately. Fair warning, I'm gonna stay on it for a little while longer. We're hearing a lot of calls for unity now. "Don't be political, don't let our differences divide us, if you'd just stop screaming for your rights, maybe we'd listen." Do not let that derail your boldness or your compassion, St. Thomas'.

A few days ago, I was talking with a friend who expressed a concern they have with our current political world. They said it's harder now than they can ever remember because their political opponents hold a weird sway. They don't feel comfortable saying what they believe about anything because A) everything is politicized and B) they're afraid that the other side will get angry, and when they get angry they get dangerous. But they said it's also tough the other way around. Because A) everything is so politicized and B) if the other side starts it, they can't even respond because it gets dangerous again.

Six.

Actually, I've heard this from several unconnected people over the past few weeks. It's a common concern these days. We want to be bold and we want to be compassionate, but doing those things is scary. Not just scary because you might get in an argument. Scary because you might get hurt. A few years back, when the Pride Float went through town in the Fourth of July Parade, there was some hollering from the curbs from folks that didn't like what they saw. It wasn't nice, but it wasn't physical either. Two years later, candy handed out by parade walkers was thrown back in their faces, hard. Y'all know the environment's even more toxic now. Some of you know what it means to be in a pride event. It requires a powerful mixture of pride (of course), self-awareness, insistence on your own value as a human being, boldness, bravery, and unfortunately, thick skin and quick reflexes.

Seven.

The Pride Float will be in the Parade again this year. I'll be driving it, yet again. But I'm telling you, the feeling is different this time around. It's still got an air of celebration, but it's a celebration surrounded by caution and concern. Who will show up, what will they show up with, and who will stand to protect us?

After I preached last week's sermon, someone asked me -- I should be clear here, it wasn't a challenge or an accusation at all, they really wanted to know. -- After last week's sermon, someone asked me just how bad it actually is for LGBT folks. It's not great. UCLA released a study showing that, compared to cisgender straight people, members of the queer community are roughly 4 times more likely to be victims of every kind of violent crime except robbery. They're more likely to be targeted by people familiar to them and more likely to be targeted by strangers.

Eight.

They're even more likely to be diagnosed with mental health disorders, though the American Psychological Association stresses that this is not because of some innate causation. Instead, the damaging effects of political targeting, religious discrimination, familial exclusion, and countless social factors are more likely at the root. Let me put that a little simpler. If everyone in your family rejects you, you have no friends, your church says you're going to Hell, and your governor says your very existence is illegal, you might get depressed.

I'm sure you're wondering by now why I've been counting throughout this sermon. LGBTQ youth attempt suicide at a much higher rate than their peers. More than four times higher. That translates to roughly one suicide attempt every 45 seconds.

Nine.

We've cycled through 45 seconds about nine times since I stood up here. Nine queer kids feeling alone and broken and abandoned and asking how it's even possible that they could've been born wrong. Nine queer kids that needed someone to tell them they love them for who they are, that God did not make a mistake when they were created, and that maybe those politicians are just idiots.

You know, there's something I missed in last week's Gospel that I really should've said something about. Jesus was sitting there eating dinner with tax collectors and sinners, it said. And the Pharisees asked how someone could possibly do such a thing. Jesus said "I desire mercy...I have come not for the righteous but for the sinners." Now, I do not think that being queer is a sin. I just don't. But if you do, I want to suggest that if you do think queerness is a sin, based off of Jesus himself, you still have to welcome queer folks into the church. Jesus ate with sinners as a regular practice. Jesus came for sinners. Jesus lived for sinners and Jesus died for sinners. If you think it's a sin, then be like Jesus, and get ready to lay down your life for them anyway.

Ten.

To be clear, I don't think it's a sin to be queer. The sin we're facing now is the brutalization our world commits against queer people. I know it's scary to confront that meanness. But if we don't, we allow the more aggressive voices to dominate. And if they dominate, it's all too easy to think they're in the majority. And if we think they're in the majority, then maybe we begin to question if we were ever in the right.

Folks, Jesus sends us to do a lot of things. One of 'em is casting out demons. It's time we cast out the demons of our society, the demons of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. It's time we cast out the demons of bigotry and hate. And it's time we cast those demons out with boldness and yes, even with compassion.

Eleven.

As we do this work, never lose sight of the human you face. Love them boldly, administer justice with compassion. You know, I'm gonna reclaim a phrase here. Gay folks have heard this used on them long enough, so maybe it's time to turn it back around. Love the sinner, hate the sin. Love the oppressor because they are human, hate the oppressing that they do.

We've got a long history in this church of doing the hard thing even when it was unpopular. Those boxes up in Liverpool hold the records of our boldness and compassion, treasures crafted in spite of history. They also hold embarrassments of inaction. I know we're writing history now. A hundred years from now, some curious priest is going to pull St. Thomas' off the shelf and see what we got up to.

Twelve.

For the sake of the twelve sent by Christ and for the sake of the twelve kids wondering why the world does what it does, I pray that curious priest a hundred years from now finds treasures of boldness and compassion. I pray they find the Kingdom of Heaven came a little nearer. And I pray they're filled with pride.