

**“The Greatest Commandment”**

Matthew 22:23-40

I Corinthians 13:8-13

A quote from Alice Walker: “Helped are those too busy living to respond when they are wrongfully attacked: on their walks they shall find mysteries so intriguing as to distract them from every blow.” *The Temple of my Familiar*, © 1989

I’d like to share the story of an experience I had back in 1987. In my mid-twenties, I was in the process of coming out as a gay man, and also was becoming very interested in reading the Bible, and the teachings of Jesus—two very significant and important parts of my own journey. After marching in my first Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco in June 1987, I felt inspired to take a trip by myself to attend a Gay and Lesbian March on Washington D.C. that coming October. So, I went about making flight and hotel reservations.

Since I had established a daily routine of reading Scripture and prayer, I integrated these into preparing for my trip, as well as after I arrived in Washington. I was a little nervous about doing this on my own, and I was trying to love God with all my heart, soul, and mind on every step of my journey.

There were many events taking place in D.C. the week of the March, and I, armed with a schedule of them, traveled around the city by the Rapid Transit system and by taxi. I discovered that there were a large number of LGBT people in town for the week, and I felt buoyed by the sense of community around me. It felt like a grand adventure!

My second morning there, I got ready to attend an event called “The Wedding”. It was to be a large ceremony and demonstration in front of the IRS building to protest the fact that same sex couples were not allowed to marry—and by extension, not allowed to file joint income taxes. Any lesbian or gay couples attending were invited to take place in a ceremony in which they would be symbolically married during the event. Although not partnered at the time, I was looking forward to attending, and hailed a cab in front of my hotel to take me there.

I hopped in the cab and told the driver I was going to the IRS building, and the somewhat serious driver asked me what was going on there. I answered that there was to be a demonstration there in support of same sex marriage rights. The next thing I knew, the driver had grabbed a Bible from beside him, found a passage from Romans (which he’d previously highlighted in yellow), and thrust it into my hands. “*Read that aloud,*” he said. Since I had recently developed a deep interest in, and curiosity about Scripture, I complied, not knowing what I was about to read. The passage dealt with the apostle Paul’s disapproval of indiscriminately sexual relationships between members of the same gender, and in a larger sense turning away from God, and their resulting punishment by a disapproving God.

To say that I was stunned by this confrontation would be a gross understatement. Given the climate of LGBT community, festivity, and pride that I’d experienced thus far in Washington on my trip, I was blindsided by such a bold and preemptive attack on my values and beliefs.

“What do you think about what you read?” The driver challenged me. I thought for a moment (and perhaps said a silent prayer), then quietly answered, “The Bible also says, ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’” The driver then went on to say that he didn’t hate the sinner; he just hated the sin...” and so on.

We arrived at the demonstration, and I paid the fare and then *tipped* the driver, as custom would have it. I was trying to respond biblically—by “turning the other cheek”, and “not returning evil for evil”.

As an aside, if this had happened to me today, I probably would have had more difficulty being so charitable with the driver. But, I also see the wisdom in the humble faith and forbearance I showed at that moment of my life.

Still full of adrenaline and dazed from my interaction with the cab driver, I made my way into the crowd. As the ceremony began, I stopped under a tree near a subgroup of people there for the demonstration. I began to casually chat with the young man next to me, and learned that he was also from the Bay Area—from Berkeley, where he was in fact a theology student. He talked a little about being a gay man in seminary, and I mentioned to him what had just transpired with the cab driver. He rolled his eyes, and said, “Was it the passage from Romans, Corinthians, or Timothy?” I said it was Romans, and he explained that these three passages from the apostle Paul’s letters are the only places in the Christian Scriptures (the New Testament) where sexual relations between men are mentioned or condemned. He added that the only condemning references to such behavior in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) are one place in Genesis, and two in Leviticus. He pointed out how these particular passages are usually cited without knowledge of or regard for the historical contexts in which they were written. The particular passage from Romans 1 that I had just read was actually an admonishment of people who had turned away from having God at the center of their lives, and thus had begun to live in less full, deep, and loving ways. My new friend also pointed out that hundreds of other Bible passages exhort us to treat our fellow humans with respect, compassion, justice, and love. This guy knew his Bible, and his words were like a light in the darkness, and a balm for my recently startled and somewhat wounded spirit. In that moment I was struck with an undeniable sense of God’s Presence with me there at the demonstration. The fact that I had somehow ended up standing next to this young man with a wealth of knowledge about Scripture—who knew exactly how to counteract its narrow-minded interpretation by the cab driver—was a tremendous gift! And to top it all off, this young man was himself from Berkeley, the city next door to mine! I felt encouraged and extremely grateful to be among kindred spirits, in supportive community, with my faith intact!

Alice Walker’s quote that I began this story with, for me, speaks to this experience:

“Helped are those too busy living to respond when they are wrongfully attacked: on their walks they shall find mysteries so intriguing as to distract them from every blow.”

Where I ended up that day after the difficult morning cab ride—and the purpose for my being there—distracted me from the blow of the narrow-minded homophobia of one person (the taxi driver), and led me into a deeper awareness of God’s presence, guidance, and care in every moment, in every situation. Perhaps the cab driver’s confrontation was what I needed to fully awaken and be ready to receive the blessings that awaited me that afternoon. (As a footnote, five years later, I met the man who was to become my legal spouse, Joe Tally, and learned that he, too, had been at “The Wedding” ceremony that afternoon in Washington!)

The actions of the driver that morning did little to convince me that I needed to change my point of view, while my conversation with my new friend gave me every reason to trust it. The cab driver may have felt he was doing the right thing by confronting me about homosexuality; perhaps he’d had other LGBT people there for the march in his cab that week, and felt it his duty to preach to us. But what his action left me—and most likely others—with was a cold, lonely feeling. I felt unloved and disrespected by his judgmental attitude toward our efforts toward equality and our spirit of celebration on that journey. Perhaps (as Stanley suggested to me last week as I recounted this story) the cab driver was wrestling with his own homosexuality, and having trouble accepting and loving him. After all, Jesus said, “Love your neighbor *as yourself*,” not “*instead of yourself*”! Could it be that the self-acceptance of so many queer people made him more uncomfortable with himself?

Ultimately, I will never know what that man’s personal struggles were, but I know that his actions are *still* reflected in the continuing actions of people today who would judge and condemn others on the basis of their sexual orientation. And while I came through that experience relatively unscathed, there are thousands of others in our country and around the world, who aren’t so fortunate. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, transgender, and intersex youth and adults face such judgment in their homes, churches, schools, and communities—without as readily finding the kind of support I received that day in Washington. Those not strong enough to stand against such bigotry become victims of self-hate, depression, and even suicide.

“Love never fails,” says Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. Learning to love ourselves as we are, however that may be, is—I believe—the beginning of learning to truly love God and love neighbor.

As the Walter Hawkins gospel song says, “Because You first loved me, Because you cared when no one else cared...” God first helps us learn to love ourselves, and only then we can truly love God--and our neighbor--in return. But to see God as an angry judge who refuses to love us until we become something we’re not makes it virtually impossible to love God. Love is where growth and healing starts, and Love is where it ultimately takes us.

The apostle Paul himself emphasized the importance of Love in all that we do, recognizing as Jesus taught that we are not to judge one another, but to love, encourage, and support one another. When we are coming from a place of faith, hope, and love, we don’t have to worry about following a list of “dos and don’ts”—we can trust God to help others with *their* lives, and to help *us* with our own. We’re not alone, we’re beloved of God; we belong to God and to one another. And we can rejoice in, and celebrate *that*, whoever we are!!

Amen.