

Pentecost – John 20:19-23 – “When The Door is Tightly Locked”

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It is so good to be with y'all this morning. I'm deeply grateful for you allowing me the space to be up in this pulpit this morning with y'all.

Y'all might be wondering who I am and why I'm saying y'all a lot. My name is Matt Lewellyn-Otten and I am the Religious Organizer at OutFront Minnesota. OutFront Minnesota is the largest LGBTQIA2S+ civil rights non-profit in the state. We envision a Minnesota where every queer and trans person is able to love who they love, be fully themselves, and be equally protected under the law. As the Religious Organizer, I have the privilege of working closely with congregations like you to activate you in the things happening in the walls of the Capitol and beyond.

You have a voice that can help to change the hearts and minds of people all across this state. I believe that people of faith are uniquely positioned to be a catalyst for dramatic change in the ways that we operate as a society – much like Jesus thought. But before we jump to Jesus too quickly, I'll keep introducing myself.

I grew up in Charleston, SC... hence the many “y'all's” flying out of my mouth. I grew up in the church, listening to the Bible stories, singing the songs, was ordained as an elder in the Presbyterian church as a teen, and even served on several of those dreaded church committees. I've been a church-kid for all of my life. I loved the church so deeply that I even went to college and majored in Bible and Religion. As a young child, I always knew I was different than other boys my age and growing up in the south, I learned how to hide my sexuality deeply.

I spent many years so deeply shoved in the metaphorical closet that I thought that praying the gay away would actually work on me. I would pray each day that God would take away this “thorn in my side” and that I could live as a straight man. Let me tell you... praying won't take the gay away.

My journey led me to many years in youth ministry - a lot of them deeply closeted and the majority out and proud. I've worked as a youth minister for over thirteen years and even went to seminary at Boston University where I earned my Master of Divinity degree.

No, I'm not an ordained minister, but I do know enough to be dangerous I like to say. My time in seminary, combined with my lived experiences allows me the unique perspective to examine the ways in which the church is wonderfully beautiful and at the same time deeply flawed.

It's beautiful because the church helped to raise me. It taught me how to use my gifts. It allowed me to refine my leadership skills. The church gave me a place to belong when I was being bullied in school. It allowed me to feel what it's like to be loved deeply by an entire community of people. It was a source of support for my parents as I navigated those tough, angsty years of high school and, yes, even college. It was a source of deep encouragement for me as I moved from Charleston, South Carolina to Boston in order to pursue my Master of Divinity degree. And I've been able to see the church as a catalyst for big social and political change.

Today's Scripture reading from John talks about a ragtag group of men (and women, most likely) who were terrified. Jesus, the rabbi they had been following for years, was now gone – killed on the cross – a painful and prolonged death sentence. The disciples cowered together in a room, with the door tightly locked, likely talking in hushed voices and exchanging nervous glances. And much like these disciples of old, I stand before you today a little scared and uncertain as I see tides shifting in our political landscape, mass shootings being to rise, and rather than leading with love and compassion, our legislators lead with greed and tyranny.

I decided to use today's text instead of the usual "tongues of fire" text we read in Acts because I thought John's account showed a new side of the disciples that is not usually celebrated on Pentecost. Here, in John's penultimate chapter we have a picture of a group of apostles who have been left scared, questioning as to what is next, now that their rabbi is gone, and ruminating over Mary Magdalene's message claiming that their rabbi appeared to her. You see, in just a few passages earlier, Jesus appeared to Mary as she cried in front of the tomb. Jesus comforted Mary, assuring her that what has happened is not an ending but only the beginning of what yet is to come. Most likely overcome with joy, Mary goes to the rag-tag group of disciples and tells them what has just happened to her.

This humble group of fisherman, tax collectors, and tradesman are now left to their own devices after living and traveling for years with their prophet. They hide because they know that their affiliation with Jesus can be seen as a treasonous act against the empire. They gather behind the tightly locked door, overcome with their own sorrow and scared for the future, when

suddenly the One that they had been mourning the death of appears right before them. See Mary was right! Jesus shows them his wounds and greets them not once, but twice with kind of an odd salutation: “Peace be with you.”

I’m unsure of how you would react, but “peace” would not be my first inclination if before me and my group of best friends appeared the very Jesus we saw crucified and buried just days before! The author of John tells us that that despite the room being tightly locked, before them stood the wounded Jesus, telling them to calm down! But this must be exactly why Jesus tells them “peace.” He greets them with “peace” because he knows that times are tough. He greets them with “peace” because he knows they are scared.

More than telling the disciples to be calm, he gives them a gift. Jesus gives them a gift because he knows that his disciples are unsure of where to turn. He gives them a gift because he knows that outside those tightly locked doors are imperial guards ready to condemn the people who have followed Jesus for the past three years. He gives them a gift because he knows that outside that locked door are the very crowds who asked Peter three times if he was the guy that followed Jesus around for so long. He gives them a special gift that is now their comforter in their time of need. Jesus breathes on them and asks them to receive the Spirit as not only their own comforter, but the comforter for all of the world. Jesus asks them, in their time of deepest sorrow and fear, to receive the Spirit that brings hope – a hope of a new beginning. It is here that we begin to see the start of something new that God is doing. It’s there, the author of John tells us, that God begins to open up the mystery of that which is yet to be.

Theologian Catherine Keller talks of the Pentecost as the ultimate invitation for us to see the sorrow of the cross not as the ending, but the beginning. It’s here, in John’s text that we see that start of something beautiful that has begun so long ago. With beautiful prose, the author of John tells us that the same Spirit that is here in the tightly locked room, the very same Spirit that is breathed upon the disciples, is the same Spirit that was present at the very beginning of creation. After the sorrow of the cross, comes the beginning of something beautiful ... the imparting of the presence of God and the beginning of the Church.

The author of John wants us to see that present within the Church’s genesis is the same spirit that was present at the genesis of the world. The same Spirit that hovered over the waters in the Genesis is the Spirit that was present with the disciples. And moreover, that Spirit is here now, calling the community of Jesus followers together to perpetuate the genesis—breathing new

life into the world, speaking boldly against injustice, healing the sick and the wounded, and working toward seeing the Commonwealth of God unfold on this earth. You see, John paints a picture of a God whose love was there at the beginning of time, looming even when there was no light and no darkness, no heavens or oceans, no plant or animal. The Love that was present at the very beginning is that same Love that is here with us now.

But the Holy Spirit doesn't only work on a cosmic level, the Holy Spirit works within the lives of individuals, even finding us in the most surprising of places even when the door is tightly locked. When I'm in the pulpit, I often share about my experience of coming out and how difficult and painful it was. And in my life, I can think of no other point where the door was so tightly shut that it was locked, dead-bolted, and barricaded. And what I have learned is that I am not alone in this experience. I have heard countless stories from queer friends and colleagues who hid (or hide) behind the same tightly locked door, scared of the persecution awaiting them on the other side. Queer people fear the rejection of their family, the possible loss of a job, the loss of power in a hegemonic society, and the rejection of their community. They fear the looming threat just outside their closet door.

But in today's text we don't see a call to remain behind that tightly locked door, but to be stirred by the Holy Spirit to open the door in order to see what lies beyond it. James Alison writes of the powerful symbolism of queer people coming out. It is in our weakness, Alison says, that the Holy Spirit occupies those places of guilt and toxicity "with such a gentleness" that we are able to open our tightly locked closet doors, riding ourselves of these internal feelings of disgust and fear.

You see, coming out becomes the new Pentecost for the queer community, opening up the doors and windows wide and blowing out negativity, despair, and inhospitality. Coming out becomes an act of resistance against a power structure that suppresses the expression of LGBTQIA2S+ people. Coming out becomes an act of resistance against a society that tells us that staying in the closet is the much better option because "I'm much more comfortable with the status quo." Coming out becomes the stuff of a Spirit-filled life, showing others that love has no boundaries, especially the love of God.

But sorrow and fear are emotions not only known by the queer community. Sorrow and fear are known by all of us. At different points in our lives, we find ourselves behind our own tightly locked doors, unsure of what to do next, unsure of where to turn, asking ourselves "where

is God in all of this?” But John says that it’s there in that tightly locked room that we find Jesus, ready to impart peace on to us, and breath the Holy Spirit out, so that we can breath in once again. And with our breath in, we find the start of something new. With the breath in, we become able to breathe out one more time. With the breath in, we become connected with the genesis that began so long ago.

I’m not standing before you today to tell you to rejoice in your sorrow... or that the joy of the morning comes after the darkest night... or that that God wants us to take great delight in our sorrow. Because I’ve found that words like that have been nothing but trouble. But what I am here to tell you is that in the midst of our sorrow, in the midst of our fears, and even behind the tightly locked doors, the Spirit still breathes. In our pain and in our darkness, in our locked rooms, the Spirit is there to bring us comfort, to bring us hope when we are ready, and to give us the stamina to unlock that door and face the crowd.

It’s there, behind the locked doors, behind the doors we have shut tightly to hide within our sorrow and fear – it’s there that God meets us. Just as the disciple locked the doors, cried to one another about the loss of their beloved rabbi, and cried out to God questioning what this all means, God greets us in our times of fear, breathing upon us the hope of something new. Welcoming us into the hope of that which is yet to be.