

## The Freedom of a Christian case study

A few days before writing this piece, I gave the speech at a local university's "Rainbow Graduation" to celebrate the LGBTQIA+ students preparing to launch into the wider world. There is a unique tension when sharing my witness as a black lesbian Christian in an LGBTQIA+ space. I represent a reclaiming, a healing, a rebellion and a restoration. I also represent what for many is still a throbbing ache and a living struggle. Even among the younger "rainbow" population, there is suspicion or resentment toward the church common enough to be expected. It is a heavy weight to carry, offering good news in way that acknowledges possible memories of rejection or judgment that render my words hollow or even hurtful.

As I spoke to the young graduates, I shared with them how I released my own shame: curled into a ball, my knees tucked under my chin, beneath the steaming water of a hot shower. I wept the gasping, ugly tears of adolescent abandon for several minutes before realizing that I still had all my clothes on — and that I was still gay. My mother was not a perfect woman, but when I called her from a pay phone at the side of a highway, she drove more than six hours through a swirling Midwestern snowstorm to get me. She never asked what happened behind the doors of a "retreat space for sexual healing and reparative therapy." I couldn't speak it aloud for more than a decade.

In that shower, what I believe to be the Holy Spirit brought to me the words of Psalm 139. God had searched me, God knew me. No part of me was hidden from God. God was privy to every lie I told to conceal my identity, every cowering withdrawal from a chance to share my story was privy to God, yet I was still somehow fearfully and wonderfully made. If God had not answered the prayers of church leaders who held me to the floor of a darkened room to cast out what possessed me, it must be because I was as God wanted me to be; perfectly whole, not in myself, but in the God who made me. Along the way, I had lost faith in that promise. I had given trust in the precious gift of salvation wrapped in the words of "Jesus Loves Me," cherished since age 5, into the hands of a world I knew by the pain it caused to be flawed and broken. I had taken what was God's, my heart and my hope, and given it to someone else. In that moment, I grasped firmly the freedom of God's grace and took it back. In that baptism shower, I remembered what was mine in Jesus.

"Why do you stay?" a student asked. "How can you still love so deep, so deep that you would pledge your life on bended knee in service to this church?" A fair and frequent question. As Luther wrote to Pope Leo, "Surrounded by the monsters of this age ... nevertheless, throughout this time, I have never turned my soul away." Because I still sometimes doubt the beauty that I am in Christ, it's only by hearing those words over and over that I can hold them. Clinging to word alone, Sunday after Sunday, I kiss the silk of my rainbow stole and whisper the prayer that hangs in my sacristy before I step into the streets of public witness. "Without your help, I would have ruined everything long ago." I discipline my lesbian body to remember its wholeness with mirror-taped affirmations and journaled poems of gratitude, and I deliberately interrupt the continuous assault of every "stubborn churchman" who uplifts anything but faith in "Christ for you AND me."

Called to live in this tangled community of pan and bi and trans and ace and gay and nonbinary and straight and cisgender humans, I see the battered brown body of Jesus in each and every one of us. I love us so very much; rejected and outcast for something someone feared long ago. I love us as holy and “overflowing with all good things” because Christ sees us, not as much of the world still does but as we were made, in their image.

Because I have so deeply experienced both the feeling of love and its absence, I know that love feels like a celebration beyond tolerance, beyond acceptance. Love feels like named and specific acceptance. Love feels like showing up, even in a Midwestern snowstorm. Love feels like justice. If I’ve been changed in any way by my faith, it’s to believe that love is something God has created us all for; even me and even you.

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