

Rev. Ali Donohue  
Episcopal Church at Yale  
September 19, 2021  
Pride Sunday

When I entered divinity school fourteen years ago I was still a Catholic. A wavering one, but Catholic. So when a Catholic friend of mine were named the co-chairs of the YDS LGBTQIA Coalition, some people were excited that for the first time, the coalition would be run by two Catholics. Their enthusiasm, unfortunately, was not rewarded; we were not very good at it. And it wasn't because we were over-committed, the usual death knell of everybody's extracurricular involvement, it was because we were *kind of out*, but not at all proud. We weren't ashamed. But we were somewhere in the middle of that long corridor all of us here have had to walk — regardless of our sexuality or gender identity — between being who other people think we are and want us to be, and being who we most are.

In spiritual circles, we talk about this as the true self and the false self. All human beings — all of us here — experience this conflict in our lives, regardless of our gender identity. The false self is the self we try to be, sometimes the self we want to be and wish we were, the self we work hard to make others think we actually are. This is the self that intuits others' expectations and strives to meet them.

The true self is not those things; it is our vulnerable self, our honest self. And it is the true self that is grounded in God. This is where all of the dynamism of our spiritual life resides; this is where prayer is real — and we can feel it. When we are loved for our false self we feel somewhat empty. When we are loved for our true self, we know it. It feels energizing and life-giving, life-changing even.

There is something uniquely difficult about this path when it involves sexual and gender identity. Our sexual and gender identities lie at the very heart of who we most authentically are, and to be rejected because of it can be terribly damaging. And tragically, Christianity has a long history of making this journey harder. Only in recent decades have we fought mightily to push back on that, to carve out spaces where we reject that messaging, where instead we lead with love and authenticity. We are in one of those spaces now.

This conflict between others' gender-norming expectations and standards, and the truth of our own heart is on full display in this evening's readings. And even though Proverbs is clearly talking about married heterosexual women, it is a piece of the whole gender-norming apparatus in which we live, and like a big game of Jenga, when we pull out this one piece, the rest of the structure is closer to collapse, and that is good.

"A capable wife who can find?" our first reading begins. And then it goes on (and on) with such an impossible list of attributes and skills that it is no wonder such a person can't be found. Many Scripture scholars are quick to point out that it is wisdom personified in this passage, and therefore this passage is so beautiful. Others rush to tell us that such a description of the wife was unheard of in its time, relegated to the subordinate fringes of society as she usually was. But this one exalts her. Isn't that bold and radical?

The answer is no, because neither reckons with the fact that when such a passage *is read in church*, and left unchallenged, it appears to carry the power of the institution with it. Most women will hear this passage and do one of three things: quietly internalize it and feel ashamed at her failure to achieve it, get on social media and do her

best to appear as if she is actually achieving it (which of course perpetuates it), or fling an expletive at it I can't repeat from a pulpit.

But we need to hear this list and see it for all of its absurdity. So many of these gender-norming codes are unspoken, and when we see them written out, and especially if we write out the ones we each have agreed to live by, we might actually see their absurdity, and that striving for them has not set us up for success. It has set us up to endlessly perform with no genuine reward. And maybe we can finally reject them, and our true self can live more freely, more fully. Our joy depends on it.

In today's Gospel, and indeed in the scope of his entire life, Jesus takes a side. He is not sitting by neutrally as we struggle. He takes a side. Jesus found himself in regular trouble with the religious and political authorities of his day because he did not comply with their norms. He hung out with the wrong people, he cured on the Sabbath, he touched the untouchables. He simply couldn't comply with rules that made him less loving; it's not who he was or who he is. He stood, and stands, with the last in line, the child, the powerless, the rejected, the vulnerable and the frightened. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," Jesus tells us.

So welcome, he implores us, the deepest part of yourselves, the part that is most vulnerable. The last part of you others see, the part of you you have relegated to the back of the line, the part you try to hide. Welcome that part of you. By doing so, you welcome Jesus and all of his transforming love.

We have come a long way, but there is still work to be done, especially for transgendered youth. In a 2018 national survey, more than half of transgender male teens reported attempting suicide in their life-

time, while 30 percent of transgender female teens said the same. Among non-binary youth, 42 percent said that they had attempted suicide at some point in their lives.

Being an ally is shown to be life-saving. You should be proud of that. Anyone who is taking even just one small step down that path to your true self should be proud. Proud of the courage. Proud of the sleepless nights, proud of determination in the face of rejection, proud of seeking out help when we need it, proud of talking about it, proud of feeling the fear and doing it anyway.

I checked in with my Coalition co-leader recently and he assured me we weren't *terrible* at it, that we did a few things, which of course means we agree that we weren't *good* at it. We were too new on the journey. I don't think we could have known fourteen years ago where our paths would lead us. His path led him to become a Catholic writer; mine, quite obviously, led me to a friendlier denomination, and ultimately to leadership within it. Both authentic discernments, both of us exactly where God wants us, both of us still friends. He recently wrote his third book, and tells me, "I am out and proud in this one." And here I stand, with a beautiful wife and two beautiful children — a boy and a girl, until they tell me otherwise.

This space we've carved out today is holy ground. And I am very proud to be standing here with you.

Amen.

