

Just over a year ago, leading up to the Fourth Sunday of Easter, someone tore up our Pride Flag. Maybe you remember this? Well, I'm sorry to say, when I got in this past Wednesday, I found the flagpole broken and those sun-fading colors on the ground. From a physical perspective, it was an easy enough fix. A new zip tie and a hacksaw was really all it took to get that Pride flag flying again. That was the easy part. The hard part started as soon as I put that flag back up. Because, just like last year, that's the moment St. Thomas' turned the other cheek. Now, I want to be clear at the outset. I don't know for certain that someone did this. There is a possibility that some natural element was responsible. A very sharp wind, a *very* sharp wind could've done it. Maybe Murphy, the raccoon we caught around Christmas, came back to get his revenge. It could've been a person, some dumb stunt that had nothing to do with making a statement and everything to do with seeing how long they could just hang there. Maybe. I want to leave space for this being a "stuff happens" moment. But much as I hate to admit it, I'm leaning pretty hard towards this being a targeted act done with intention. For one thing, it's the second time our flag's been damaged. For another, the flagpole's almost an inch thick. It would take hundreds of pounds of pressure to break that thing, and I'm having a hard time picturing the kind of wind or raccoon that could do it.

So, I'm left with the assumption that someone did this on purpose. I have a very clear message for that person: we will not be cowed by this. This church will not stop proclaiming love because we've been threatened. We can't let the fear of what might happen keep us from standing up for what we believe. And one of the many things we believe is that Jesus welcomed, invited, and included up until the moment he died. Even on the cross he invited a criminal to join him in Paradise. He didn't tell him to leave him alone or deport him or stuff down internal sympathy out of fear of the centurion's spear. He invited him. Jesus was warned many times before his arrest. From public questions meant to trip him up to private conversations begging him to cool it until the rulers' anger passed, Jesus kept at it. Because what he had said and done, what he'd promised would lose its meaning if he stopped when it got inconvenient.

We started flying that flag a while ago, long enough that people recognize us in part by those rainbow colors. St. Thomas' has gained a well-earned reputation for being a welcoming parish, but more importantly, we've gained a reputation for being a safe place. I want to be very clear about something. We fly that flag not because we're trying to advertise or hook some special group. We fly that flag because, for a mighty long time, that flag has meant at the bare minimum that if you are gay and you walk in here, you won't have to be afraid. Yes, we do this partially because it's our Christian duty to welcome those no one else would, but the main reason is proclaiming sanctuary.

I know a lot of y'all aren't in the LGBTQ+ family, so let me tell you what that flag means. The Pride flag affirms welcome and identity. It lets people know we aren't one of those scary churches. Hanging specifically on the front of the church, it tells queer people who've literally been damned, disowned, condemned by the churches they grew up in that this church believes that God loves them, that God created them to be beautifully and fully whoever they are, that when they come here they will be cherished as uniquely sacred, and that our body is lacking without them. The Pride flag is an outwardly visible sign, and inside this building is a mountain of spiritual grace. There's a word for that in our catechism by the way, an "outward visible sign of inward spiritual grace..."<sup>1</sup> But it's more. That flag is a clear and stubborn claim that this place is safe. I've used that word a few times, but I'm not sure everyone understands exactly what kind of "safe" I mean. I don't mean "safe" as in 'no one'll be mean to you' or "safe" as in 'we're milquetoast enough so as to

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<sup>1</sup> Book of Common Prayer, p. 857

not stand for anything, so you're safe by default.' What "safe" means is that you won't be beaten here. You won't be excommunicated here. You won't be sent to Hell, and you won't be killed to speed the process along. That flag means we hold no space for hatred or hypocrisy. That flag means we will put ourselves at risk so that the most highly targeted among us finally get a break. That flag means that if you come into this space, maybe for the first time in years, you can breathe without looking over your shoulder.

For those of you who aren't queer or part of any minority, I want you to consider this question: have you ever stepped inside a room full of strangers and wondered who in that room hates you because of how you were born? Some can answer that with a resounding yes. Some can't. So let me try this: have you ever been to a diner outside of the place you live? When you go in, every single regular turns around and stares at the door like it had no right opening when it did. And they stare at you when you walk in because they don't recognize you and they're trying to place you at the same time. Maybe they think you've met and can't figure out where, or maybe they think because you've got long hair or no hair or a cane that you fit in a certain category. They definitely watch as you choose your seat 'cause you just might sit in Geraldine's spot, and everybody knows Geraldine wouldn't like that one bit and they don't wanna have to deal with her guff. Maybe they turn back to their food, maybe the server asks you some questions, maybe they pay you no attention for the rest of the meal, but still you're self-conscious because you know you're still an outsider, they made sure you knew that when you walked in, and you'll stay an outsider until the moment you leave or the moment you buy a house and live in it for 30 years before heading back to that same diner. Now take that discomfort, that awkwardness, that intense feeling of disdain and curiosity and self-consciousness, mix in a healthy dose of hostility with centuries of scapegoating, discrimination, and physical danger, a dash of ecclesial exile, and a second helping of judgement and curses, and you'll get close to what it feels like to be unsure of every room, every person, every empty sidewalk or and every unnervingly quiet street. That flag says, when you walk in, no one you meet here is going to hunt you down. That flag says these people will give you hugs not sucker punches. That flag says when you come in here you can count on being able to go home.

Do y'all know about Matthew Shepard? His story's a complicated one, sure, but it ends in the kind of tragedy no one deserves. Fair warning, this part's a bit graphic. Matthew Shepard was murdered by a couple of other men because he was gay. The two men offered him a ride home, but instead they took him to a secluded area outside of Laramie, Wyoming, where they robbed him, beat him, tortured him, tied him to a fence, and left him for dead. He was so badly beaten that the only part of his face that wasn't covered in blood had been washed clean by his tears. When a cyclist found him, he thought the comatose Matthew was a scarecrow. Matthew died six days later. The Westboro Baptist Church attended his funeral with signs claiming "God Hates Fags." He was cremated, and because of the vitriol anti-gay churches stoked, his mother was afraid his grave would be desecrated so she didn't inter his ashes anywhere. 20 years after his death, Matthew's remains finally came to rest at the Washington National Cathedral under the care of Bishop Marian Edgar Budde, whose name likely rings a bell for those who witnessed her prophetic preaching earlier this year.<sup>2</sup> That Pride flag says Matthews are safe accepting rides from people here. That flag says God loves Matthews. That flag says if we do your funeral we'll do it with all the grace and honor you deserve. But that flag also says we'll do everything in our power and with God's help to make sure that funeral of yours stays a long way off. That flag doesn't mean we want Democrats; that flag means we won't kill you. And that's what got torn off our building. Now do you get it?

Y'all, when I get up in this pulpit, I don't preach what I preach because I don't think you read the news. I preach what I preach because real, actual, honest to God human beings are brutalized, and the majority of people aren't doing a damn thing to stop it. I preach what I preach because people that are supposed to represent

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.matthewshepard.org/>

our interests are doing the brutalizing. I preach what I preach because many of the people doing all that brutalizing are doing it because they say that's what Jesus wants. I preach what I preach because, categorically, that's not just wrong, it's manipulative, sadistic, disgusting, and evil. I preach what I preach because I actually believe that Jesus meant it when he said, "Just as I've loved you, you should love one another."

Y'all, I'm mad. I'm heartened by the words of support this community's sent our way since that vandalism. But I'm still mad. I'm mad that this is still something that has to be considered. I'm mad that politicians are talking about revoking gay rights. I'm mad that so many people can't seem to put themselves in another person's shoes. I'm mad that they think that gives them a right to force an entire group of people to live in secret and in fear, if they're allowed to live at all. And I'm mad that when I tell people they're coming for queer folks, I'm called an alarmist jumping to unfounded conclusions.<sup>3,4,5,6,7,8</sup>

I know I'm supposed to be calm, show y'all that the best response is to turn the other cheek, and I will. But you need to know something about turning the other cheek. That's not a response of timidity and surrender. Turning the other cheek is an act of resistance. Turning the other cheek says that we will continue to stand here, flag waving, arms open, hearts loving no matter how many times we get hit. We will stare down their anger and when they're finished, and y'all, trust me when I say I know this is the hardest part, when they've finished exhausting their bigotry, we will love them, too.

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Then again, maybe it was just the wind.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/post/195375/trump-judge-ok-discriminate-lgbtq-people>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-appointed-federal-judge-rules-against-biden-era-sex-based-employment-discrimination-guidance>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aol.com/house-bill-trump-ban-transgender-110056033.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.breitbart.com/news/major-social-media-platforms-fail-to-protect-lgbtq-users-advocacy-group-glaad-says/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/medical-associations-and-lgbtq-organizations-condemn-transphobic-hhs-report/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>