

When I first got out of seminary, I was ready to show the world what an amazing priest the Episcopal Church made. I fumbled plenty, got humbled lots. Little Rock rebuilt me as a more realistic priest. Hamilton welcomed me with a deep love of life I wanted in myself. When the pandemic began, I was grateful for all those formative places in my rearview mirror. But when I got sick, shoot. When I got sick, it brought just about everything into question. All the ones you're thinking of. The "how could God do this-es" and the "why me-s, why now-s." But there were others that I didn't see coming. Do I actually believe in God? For the record, yes. Do I actually want to be a priest? Again, for the record, yes. Do I actually want to represent the Episcopal Church? That's a big yes. But do I actually want to represent Christianity? Welllllll....

That one was harder to process. The Church has a mixed bag of a track record. None of y'all'll be surprised by that. There's the obvious ones. The Crusades weren't great. The debates about slavery weren't either. The weaponization of cherry-picked passages for the oppression of whatever group you choose, also not great. But y'all know those. I knew those when I signed up and figured I was, on balance, still in favor. It's one thing to look back and cringe at how bad we messed things up *back then*. But now? Well, it's not much better. I saw violence overrun our capital and, once the insurrectionists had control of the senate floor, one yelled, "Jesus Christ, we invoke your name!" Christianity has become gasoline on the anti-gay fire. The equality of races comes into question thanks to the so-called ancient "mark of Cain." Even the desire to help the poor gets parried with Jesus' own words: "the poor will always be with you." Can I stand to be a Christian knowing that Christians do *that*?

Have y'all ever heard of the Good Stormtrooper Dilemma? For those of you that still haven't seen a Star War, I think you'll be able to follow just fine, so don't tune out. The Good Stormtrooper Dilemma asks, can you be a good stormtrooper? Let's say you work on the Death Star (that's where the bad guys are). You're really nice and kind to all your coworkers. You bring space donuts to work, you tidy up the space breakroom, you even pat your stormtrooper friends on the back when they fail at the space shooting range. Aboard the Death Star, you're good! But the entire point of the Death Star is that it blows up planets and spreads terror and tyranny across the galaxy. You being "good" increases morale, which makes everyone else better at their jobs, terrible, horrifying jobs. Which leads us to the dilemma: are you still good if you facilitate evil?

Now that dilemma, y'all, it's stuck with me. As tough as it is, I think we all need to encounter that question. Given all that the Church has been used for, are we at risk of becoming good stormtroopers? I can hear the counterpoints already, so let me just add this bit: I do not think Christ intended a Death Star to come out of his Church. I believe deeply in the Gospel message, that Christ came for all, and because of that, we serve all. But also, it's a fair critique. Regardless of what Christ intended, people got ahold of this treasure, and we did what we always do. We peopled. I don't want to get too denominationally arrogant about it, but I know the Episcopal Church is different. Pride month arrived with a blur of rainbows across Episcopal social media. Compare that with the high-profile American preacher that just came out in support of Uganda's death penalty for LGBT folks. We show up for justice, for peace, for love, and for hope. We hold no truck with hate. BUT, we are Christians. And Christians, whether we like it or not, whether we agree with it or not, Christians get lumped in with other Christians. When I look at the Good Stormtrooper dilemma, sometimes I see us on the same ship as those twisting Christianity into spiritually abusive, manipulative controls. And sometimes, I see us as the Rebellion trying to set it aright.

That's great, but a whole lot of folks outside of Christianity don't see the difference. We're all Christian. We're all on the same ship together, and the rest of the world's trying to live under our thumb. Meanwhile,

groups like ours can come off as the donut-bringers trying to make everyone else have a better day while the Death Star keeps spreading fear, domination, and oppression. Last year, that all clicked for me in a big way, and that all clicked at the same time that I was becoming more and more aware of my own mortality and my own limitations. When I came back to work, I didn't feel like I had time to wait for the world to see us as what we say we are. I didn't have time for Congress to get around to taking care of people. I didn't have time to wait and see how everything would turn out in the end. And you know what? I still don't. Tomorrow isn't promised to me, to you, to St. Thomas', even to Hamilton. Our expectations for the future are tenuous. Forget about that. What's happening right now, in this place, today? What are we doing with the time we have, not the time we might have later on, but the time here, now? If we're not serving God through God's people, all of 'em, we're wasting one opportunity after another. It's probably not a great place to be, but I'm impatient for this Kingdom of God to show up. I'm impatient for our own church to get corrected where it needs it. I'm impatient for other churches to get their corrections, too, really impatient. And I'm extra special impatient for the world as a whole to get corrected.

I know impatience isn't great and also, I'm feeling a real sense of urgency. For the first time in its history, the Human Rights Campaign just declared a national state of emergency for queer folks. The least we can do is show up. Fly a flag, wear a shirt, offer your support, give a hug. I know, for some of you, this'll make you a little itchy. To be clear, Pride is not about flying a rainbow so everyone can know what you get up to in the bedroom. There's an internet meme that puts a fine point on it: "Pride is important because someone tonight believes they're better off dead than being gay." That's because some Christians have said so. That's because Christians have said so.

Our smoke-filled skies last week felt like the apocalypse blew in with a cool spell. It makes me grateful that our town is such an oasis most of the time. But this tiny apocalypse relit that flame that started burning last year, that stormtrooper looking for the best way to be. For many, the apocalypse is a long way off, an imagined thing that makes for a good metaphor. But for far too many, the apocalypse is here right now.

Look, I know there's no cure-all for how the world looks at Christianity these days. I know there are plenty that look at us with disdain, distrust, and fear. Rightly so, I'm sad to say. Even our offers of love and open doors ring hollow much of the time. They've heard it all before, only to get stung once again. We can work to fix that, but we have to work. We can't just tell folks they're welcome and put up a sign. We've got to show up, stick our necks out. Matthew himself left a cushy job to follow Jesus. Surely we can give up a little of our own comfort to do the same. Another astute meme says, "If you're not getting hit by the stones meant for those you claim to be allies with, you're not standing close enough." I don't imagine those oppressed by Christianity'll suddenly flood our doors. But there will be some who're willing to look beyond all our flaws and reach for Christ's garment. And with some, come more, and more still.

Last week, I talked about how incomplete our understanding of God is without every single person's unique sliver of the image of God. We don't fight the good fight to fill these pews. We fight the good fight for justice, for peace, for hope, for love because that's what Jesus was about. We fight the good fight for another glimpse at the growing image of God. We cannot understand God, cannot live faithfully into God, without searching for God in every person. That means Gay folks are sacred. Lesbians are sacred. Bisexuals are sacred. Trans folks are sacred. The list is longer, but it is sacred to the end and then some. You don't have to understand to love them. Just love them. For Christ's sake, for Christianity's sake, just love 'em.