

Y'all know I've lived lots of places. I've seen, lived, even worshiped alongside folks from all kinds of churches. And I gotta say, much as I love the heart of Christianity, there's some stuff that I don't love all that much. Like, the morning after Gene Robinson's election as bishop was confirmed -- if you don't know, Gene Robinson was the first openly gay and partnered bishop -- the morning after Bishop Robinson's election was confirmed, the church I was baptized in found that a parishioner had adorned the church doors with a black wreath, signaling the impending death of the church. When Bishop Robinson was ordained, he wore a bulletproof vest underneath his vestments for fear of other Christians, including in our own denomination. Or the woman who volunteered to do work with the homeless and showed up at the first meeting ready to help. Those gathered couldn't afford prescription drugs, some wore shredded clothing, at least two found the underside of an overpass had become a kind of white noise after so many nights hiding from tornadoes. The volunteer arrived ready to serve in a three-quarter length authentic fox fur coat and a string of the biggest pearls I've ever seen. She said she didn't want us to mistake her for one of them. There was the vestry that barred a man from teaching Sunday School because he was gay. The woman who sat directly behind a pew-full of new college students, pulled out her kneeler so she could position herself right next to their ears while pretending to pray, and said, "Y'all better behave. You're in my pew and I don't want to see any disrespect." There's the man who took cardboard boxes directly to the dump because he'd seen somebody make a sleeping mat out of an old refrigerator box and didn't want to encourage that behavior near "his" church. There's the office worker who closed the parish hall to anyone they didn't recognize and some they did. There's the priest who embezzled six figures, the pastor that excommunicated my best friend because getting a B on his report card was "dishonoring his parents," the endless flood of vitriol poured into gay friends' ears, and the condemnation of their souls when all that vitriol fueled an abrupt end. There are other examples, worse examples, but these I've seen firsthand.

What breaks my brain is that these are familiar stories. They're familiar to us, and somehow we keep coming back. These stories are familiar to the rest of the world, too. I think we have a misconception that most folks that don't come to church never learned that going to church was a thing they could do. Or, their parents raised them up to make their own choice, and they never chose us. Or, they might be interested in church but sleeping in on Sundays is more appealing. Or maybe *gasp* maybe they don't even believe in God at all! Sure, those folks are out there. But from what I've seen, most folks (not all, of course, but most) that don't come to church fall into two categories. The first? They're not Christian, never were, never want to be. Maybe they belong to another religion, maybe they don't, but they aren't interested in what we get up to on Sundays.

And then there's the second group. These are the folks who at some time or another really, deeply believed in the teachings of Jesus. Maybe they still do. They fell in love with the Word of God, the prophets' calls for mercy, justice, and peace. The Baptismal Covenants' vow to respect the dignity of every human being. The ancient understanding that every human bears a sliver of the image of God. The beauty of the liturgy, the love of community, the power of good people working together. And something broke it. Most of the time, something broke it from the inside. Some cruel parishioner, some indelicate priest, some blatant hypocrisy. And whatever that was, it still hurts, physically hurts to be near a church anymore because of that deep spiritual betrayal. It hurts not because they don't care as much as you or I but because they once did. And they can no longer imagine a church as anything but a source of pain.

Take, for example, the Episcopal Church's beloved catchphrase, "All are welcome." Sounds good, right? You might wonder why we went with "Our Hearts And Doors Are Open To All" on that banner instead. If you've heard this before, my apologies. Bear with me. When that banner was coming together, I google image

searched “all are welcome church sign.” The whole page filled with little stand-alone marquees pointing at different kinds of church doors. I followed each “all are welcome” sign to each church’s website, and every last one of them had a prominent statement spelling out who, exactly, was not part of the “all” that were welcome. Mostly it was queer people. In other words, even the seemingly loving phrase “all are welcome,” which actually does encapsulate what we’re about, even that has become poisoned. *We* know what we mean by that phrase, but outside these walls, there’s little to differentiate us in the minds of the deeply betrayed. We strive for our “all” to really mean all, but they don’t know that. And even if they do, there’s so much healing that has to happen before they can accept it as true, and even then, they’ve gotta go against every shred of instinct, every echo in their souls trying to keep them from getting hurt again, every fight or flight synapse firing furiously as the danger of those big red doors grows closer.

If you’ve never had that experience of church, count yourself among the lucky. I’ve had it. And I can tell you, that big red door that *we* know signals sanctuary for all, that big red door starts to look like an impenetrable castle gate. That belltower that calls us to worship begins to look like a watchtower spotting evil approaching, and that evil is you. The soaring ceiling we love for drawing our eyes to heaven swallows you whole and spits the used up you back out again, weary and broken on the pitted sidewalk. The people *we* know to be loving and kind stare back as the door creaks open a few minutes late and without judging *look* just like the ones that judged before. I know some of ya’ll’re probably thinking, “*those* Christians are just a few bad apples; it’s not fair for us to get lumped in with them.” Y’all, Christianity has put up with A LOT of bad apples in our history. Some of them have gotten their due, but for way too many we just roll our eyes and excuse their behavior. We’ve favored the bad apple over the broken lamb. And now we’re shocked when barrels of bad apples spoil our world under the name of Christianity. Sometimes it feels like there’s only a few good apples left, all naturally right in this very room.

Now, I’m well aware of the whole judge-not-lest-ye-be-judged-yeself thing. I get that. But also, y’all, there are aspects of modern Christianity that absolutely are not Christian. I don’t think it’s wrong to tell folks what Christianity actually requires of them. I fear if we don’t, true Christianity’ll wither and die as false Christendom rises. What we face now is the guise of Christianity. And it’s a guise that is both incredibly damaging and deeply appealing. It’s damaging because, as it grows, it’s ever louder voice tells the world it’s okay to embrace your evil intentions and hate, injure, even kill anyone that doesn’t conform. And it’s appealing because it reinforces so much of the secular world’s desires. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus says, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

Let me put that in clearer language. Jesus says “give all your money to the poor” while the growing perversion says “You’ll get all the money you want if you just live like we say.” Jesus says, “love your neighbor” while they say, “report your neighbor.” Jesus says, “feed my sheep,” but they say, “just not at school.” Jesus says, “there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for another,” while they profit at sacred gravesides. I can keep going. Jesus says, “I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” They say “it’s ok to shoot a lost kid turning around in your driveway.” Their clothing reads, “I don’t care, do you?” They raise the price of life-saving medication and ridicule the sick for their illness. And they fill their storehouses from prison coffers.

I think y’all get the point. It’s one thing to listen to Jesus’ words and come to various conclusions; that’s all Christian denominations are. It’s another thing entirely to ignore Christ and his teachings and still claim his name. The thing masquerading as Christianity has taken a controlling stake in the Christian world, and it is nothing short of evil. There’s a trail of injury, betrayal, and even death at its hands. And too many of us are

hesitant to call it what it is. Maybe we're afraid to insult someone. Maybe we don't want to come off as denominationally arrogant. Maybe we aren't entirely sure if we're right or if they're all that wrong. Maybe a part of us wishes we could be as successful as them. But whatever the reason, we've gotta speak up, and I mean from now until the wolf in sheep's clothing is exposed for the imposter it is. We've also gotta stand between that evil and the ones it aims to erase. That doesn't mean you have to like being around whoever that wounded soul is, but you do have to love them. And when they come here, IF they muster the courage to come here, make them feel loved and valued and cherished as much as you can, and they just might feel again a tiny piece of what they once felt for God. Better yet, whether they come here or not, love and value and cherish them.

I'm having trouble getting this into diplomatic words. I'm not feeling all that diplomatic these days. Christianity as a whole has hurt so many people that we are shrinking for our hatred. St. Thomas', I know we aren't a place of hate. I know we espouse love and acceptance and all that good, Jesus-y stuff. But the world doesn't. They may not even know if any Christian group is capable of Jesus-y stuff anymore. It's our job to fix that. It's our job to make sure every kid knows they are cherished by God simply for being who they are. It's our job to invite the hopeless in. It's our job to love this world and all that live in it. And it's our job to correct where we fail. But before we can pull any of that off, it's our job to seek forgiveness for what's been done. You may not have done it personally, but Christians have, and we share that name. What Christians have broken, Christians must repair. And we absolutely must come at this work with humility. We may not be able to fix it, not on our own. But we need to try. And we need to try not so our pews get fuller and our pledges get stronger. We need to try so that Christianity might survive, and with it, the true way of love Jesus preached.

We have fear to overcome, ours and theirs. We have betrayals to reconcile. We have lives to save, literally. And my God, do we have apologies to make. The world needs us to do these things, but it also needs to see us doing them. Now, I'm normally a "don't do good deeds where people can see you" kinda guy. But right now, the world needs to remember what Christianity really means, and they're not seeing it modeled. We gotta be seen doing these things to remind our world what Christianity is when it's great. Because when Christianity is great, it's really, really great. It's inclusion and kindness and hope. And my God, does our world need inclusion and kindness and hope. We do this right, and our doors'll radiate contrition and humility and healing. Our belltower'll ring invitation. Our soaring ceiling'll barely reach high enough to contain all the joy. And finally, our name -- Christian -- will once again mean love.