

The Rev. Brandon Ashcraft
The Second Sunday after Pentecost (Year B) / 1 Samuel 3:1-10
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
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Marvelously Made & Called by Name
A Biblical Message for LGBTQ+ Pride

When I was growing up in Mississippi, there was a phrase that often made its way into conversation. It went something like this: “Well, *you know*, the Bible says...” In my experience, what followed these words was rarely helpful. More often than not, they signaled the speaker’s intention to cast judgment, wielding the words of holy scripture. The real problem with this phrase, “The Bible says,” is its inference that the Bible speaks plainly, and all we have to do is listen to what it tells us.

Even at a young age, this seemed too simplistic to me. Especially since the Bible seemed to raise as many questions as it provided answers. And after all, my English teachers were teaching me how to interpret Shakespeare and Chaucer. Why wouldn’t the Bible, which was several centuries older, demand similar tools of interpretation?

Many years later, I found great comfort in the work of a New Testament scholar who writes persuasively about “the myth of textual agency.”¹ This scholar dismantles the assumption that biblical texts speak for themselves, arguing instead that the agency belongs to the reader, who makes meaning from the texts.

Growing up in the milieu of the “Bible Belt,” I heard a lot of things the Bible supposedly “said.” I can’t recall the first time I heard someone claim, “the Bible says...being gay is a sin.” But I know that I was young. And even though I never heard it in my church, it was gospel in the wider culture.

Thanks be to God, my faith communities made radically different claims about scripture. They taught me that the Bible was neither an instrument of condemnation, nor a tool for determining who was “in” and who was “out.” Rather, the Bible was a life-giving fountain of grace. They taught me that the work of interpreting the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit. And that any endeavor to understand it was best undertaken in loving community and with a spirit of humility.

Because of these faith communities, and their approach to interpreting the scriptures, I was finally able, as a young man in my 20s, to embrace my identity as a gay man beloved by God. A gay man beloved by the Creator who, as the psalmist sings, “knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

On your way into church this morning, you may have seen the colorful display of flags in the Clarendon Porch in honor of Pride Month. These flags continue Trinity’s tradition of outwardly and visibly supporting the community. A recent report on religious life in Boston, published by the Pluralism Project at Harvard, highlights Trinity’s ministry to the LGBTQ+ community across many decades.² This suggests that our reputation as an inclusive and affirming church is well established.

¹ Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 2.

² <https://pluralism.org/lgbtq-religion-boston>

And in the meantime, the world has come a long way. We're almost a decade from the Supreme Court decision that legalized same-sex marriage in this country. And it's been more than 20 years since the Episcopal Church ordained Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop.

So, for all these reasons, we could easily be lulled into complacency. The sense of urgency behind our outreach to the LGBTQ community could begin to wane. *But I pray that it will not.* Because the voices using the Bible to deny the human dignity of LGBTQ+ people continue to speak a message of oppression. And some of these voices are growing louder, particularly in their opposition to the transgender community.

The implications of their voices are frightening, particularly for our young people. Research has long shown that when young people are part of a faith community where they feel safe and affirmed, it supports their mental health and wellbeing.³ On the flip side, studies show that LGBTQ youth rejected by their religious communities often suffer trauma, leaving them at increased risk for suicidality, substance abuse, homelessness, anxiety and depression.⁴

So next Saturday, when we gather under those flags as the Pride March moves up Clarendon Street, our presence, our witness, and our message of welcome is as important as ever. As companions in the household of God, we must stand ready with arms outstretched to embrace our LGBTQ+ siblings as fellow companions. To offer them a vision of beloved community. To speak a biblical message of hope and radical welcome that many of them have never heard but desperately need to hear.

In the scriptures appointed for our worship this morning, we find just such a message of hope. The Old Testament passage that Carol read for us is one of the best known "call stories" in the Bible, the Call of Samuel. When we meet Samuel this morning, he is a young boy ministering as an apprentice under an elderly priest named Eli, in the house of the Lord at Shiloh.

What you should know is that Eli has two wicked sons, and under their leadership the house of the Lord has become rampant with corruption. As a consequence, God is preparing to raise up young Samuel as a prophet to take their place. God calls Samuel – quite literally calls him by name – in the middle of the night.

Now, God could have called anyone to be the first great prophet of Israel. He could have called a skilled warrior. A pious priest. An elderly sage. And yet, he called a child. This story of scripture reminds us that God calls our young people, just as God called Samuel. God calls them to important tasks, just as God called Samuel to be a prophet.

Rather than talk *about* them, I would prefer to talk *to* them. So, children and youth of Trinity Church, I am speaking to you! God calls you. God calls you to use your God-given gifts to be ministers in this community and in the world. Indeed, you are of infinite worth in the eyes of God, and we cannot be the Church without you. Whether you are gay or straight or non-binary, or even if you

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4706071/>

⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S027795362200346X#sec8>

don't know or aren't sure, hear me when I say: God loves you just as God created you. and you are "marvelously made."

But there's more to the story of Samuel's call. There is also good news for those of us of more seasoned years. Despite young Samuel's eagerness and willingness, he could not respond to God's call on his own. Night after night, Samuel hears God calling his name, but on his own, he cannot recognize that the voice belongs to God. It is only with the help of the elderly priest Eli, the one whose "eyesight had begun to grow dim," that Samuel is finally able to understand that it is God calling his name. Without Eli, Sameul could never have uttered those faithful, life-changing words, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

My friends: this treasure of Holy Scripture is a reminder that we need each other. It is a story of what it looks like to listen for God's voice in an intergenerational community. There are so few places in our world that foster genuine intergenerational community and yet, look around. We have it right here, and what a gift it is. This is what we have to offer our LGBTQ+ siblings. A community where they can find love and wholehearted acceptance. A community where they can listen for the voice of the God who calls them by name. A place where they can hear biblical messages spoken in love that affirm their beloved-ness.

As we cheer on the Pride March next Saturday, I pray that we will remember this story of God calling a child to an extraordinary task. May it also inspire us to hold in our hearts those children who cannot hear God's voice, because they've only heard messages denying their goodness. May we have the will and the determination to speak a different message. Because there are children, indeed people of all ages, out there, who need us to be Eli. The one who tells them the truth: that God is calling them by name.

I find great comfort in the fact that God refused to give up when Samuel didn't recognize his voice that first night. Instead, God called him again the next night. And when Samuel didn't recognize God's voice the second night, God called him again the next night. And then again the next night. God refused to give up on Samuel, because God has an unrelenting desire for his children to hear his voice. A desire so unrelenting that he sent us his Son Jesus, to take on our very flesh. The very Jesus who meets us this morning in the gifts of bread and wine around this altar.

May we, like God, be unrelenting in offering a biblical message of radical welcome and love. Until all children of God know themselves to be beloved. Amen.