

Feast of Sts Peter and Paul
 St. Luke in the Fields, NYC
 June 29, 2014

Do You Love Me?
At the 45th Anniversary of the Stonewall Riots

Good evening. It is an honor to be with you at the conclusion of Pride Week here in New York City at the forty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. This is the second NYC Pride I have ever attended, the first one being twenty years ago, the “Spirit of Stonewall” parade that honored the twenty-fifth anniversary. As a college student who had come out a year earlier, I was eager to learn as much as I could about the history of the movement and to walk in the wider stream of our ongoing communal work. I was saturated the heat and humidity, overwhelmed by the vastness of the crowd, awed by the small group of Stonewall Veterans – trans women of color prominent among them – at the front of the parade. I bought a tee-shirt, white with a firework-like splash of rainbow, that said “Seize the Spirit: Stonewall 25.” As an inveterate Episcopal Church geek, I couldn’t help but be tickled by the connection between the parade and the liturgical season of Pentecost in which it happened to be located. The shirt’s “spirit” reference clearly spoke to a sense of ethos rather than the third Person of the Trinity. Yet as a Christian I couldn’t help pondering – theologically reflecting upon – how the Holy Spirit might be understood to be circulating and swirling amid this event, this history, this people of multiple races and ethnicities, classes, sexualities and genders who have long struggled to work together, to be in some sense one community amid our multiple sub-communities. As I continue to think about this question through the prism of our readings this evening, the watchword that comes to the fore is, perhaps not surprisingly, love: love that in its inherent excess must be queried and offered repeatedly; love that honors our connections without smoothing over or erasing our

complexities and contradictions; love that pours out tears over our losses; love that carries us through the fire and transforms us beyond our imagining.

In our readings, the theme of love is bound up—or “knit together” as our collect puts it—with the idea of union. This is a communally catalytic love, creating a union that overcomes loss and division. The emphasis on this connection speaks to how the Church seeks to honor the Feast Day of the Apostles Peter and Paul. Peter and Paul may have been pillars of the Church, but they were not by any means always on the same page. Paul’s letters and the Acts of the Apostles reference their struggle. They ultimately found a way to target their work in distinct communities: Paul reached out to Gentiles while Peter focused upon fellow members of the Jewish community. They disagreed about how to draw communal boundaries in their present, about continuities and discontinuities of practice with the late antique Judaism in which they were formed. The context of imperial Rome also mapped itself on their lives in differential ways. Paul is remembered as carrying the privilege of Roman citizenship whereas Peter likely did not. This difference is reflected in the legends about their death: Paul was allegedly granted the citizen’s death of beheading by sword while Peter died slowly, crucified like Jesus himself, but apparently upside down so as not to put himself in Jesus’ place.¹ In the ensuing centuries, their hierarchical status has been somewhat reversed, particularly in Roman Catholic tradition, in which Peter has long been considered the original prince of the church, while in the Reformed traditions Paul’s reflections on “faith and works” has risen to the fore.

The gospel reading for the feast of these two forebears forms one of the final exchanges between Jesus and his disciples in the Gospel of John. It shortly follows – and seems to have

¹ “Saint Peter and Saint Paul, Apostles” in *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* (Church Publishing, 2010), 446.

been sutured onto – another of John’s post resurrection stories. The disciples had fished all night in the Sea of Tiberias, led by Simon Peter. At dawn after a dismal night, a mysterious stranger appeared on the shore, sympathized with their hard luck and encouraged them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. Suddenly the nets were filled to bursting. Realizing the identity of this stranger Peter threw himself into the water and raced ashore. A charcoal fire and breakfast awaited them. Our reading picks up the dialogue after breakfast, as Jesus homes in on Peter and the Beloved Disciple. “Do you love me, Simon, son of John?” Jesus inquires not once, not twice, but three times. The second iteration, I imagine, splashed across Peter’s face like a bucket of cold water, invoking the denial he pronounced three times the night of Jesus’ arrest: “I tell you, I do not know the man.”² Jesus’ use of Simon rather than Simon Peter or simply Peter, points backwards. It is as if Jesus is saying *perhaps indeed, you did not fully know me. Perhaps you were terrified to be seen with me. But now, on the other side of this great ordeal, the question is do you love me?* To which the answer of course is *yes, yes, yes!* In a sermon on this passage, Augustine of Hippo, North African bishop and theologian of the early Church, commented that Jesus’ three repeated questions signal a certain resurrection of Peter. Something in Peter had died when he had denied his Lord. Their vital bond had been frayed, if not shattered. But in this interchange the risen Christ called love out of him, held love up as a sign of resurrection at work in the world, here and now.³ Love restores, binds up, feeds, tends. Perfect love, in the words of another Johannine writing, “casts out fear” (1 Jn 4:18). It ejects fear, not in a gentle wave, but with an indefatigable roar, just as Peter had hurled himself into the sea.

² Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (The Anchor Bible Doubleday, 1970), 1101-1122.

³ Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 229N.I.

On a day like today, as seas of people joyously celebrate the catalyzing spark that was the Stonewall Riots, the power and persistence of love feels close at hand. That love is clearly flowing out there in the streets, echoing off the buildings, fabulously celebrating being alive in a day and age when so much has changed for LGBTQ people—way more than the original rioters probably imagined. Even the last few weeks have brought new victories. President Obama has announced that he will sign an executive order explicitly protecting LGBT federal contractors against discrimination (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/07/21/president-obama-signs-new-executive-order-protect-lgbt-workers>). Medicare has now overturned its exclusion of transition related healthcare (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/31/us/ban-on-medicare-coverage-of-sex-change-surgery-is-lifted.html?_r=0), and several states (like Massachusetts <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/06/20/state-cover-gender-reassignment-surgery-and-hormone-treatment-for-transgender-patients/a9OPrvqdUPmRoiAQugVwEO/story.html>) are doing the same with Medicaid. Here in New York, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project has just filed suit to pursue this end (<http://srlp.org/breaking-srlp-sues-ny-state-doh-for-medicoids-exclusion-of-transgender-healthcare-2/>). New York State (although not NYC) now has a new more humane policy for enabling trans people to change the gender markers on our birth certificates (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/10/opinion/progress-on-transgender-rights-and-health.html>). Maryland has recently become the eighteenth state to pass transgender non-discrimination legislation (<http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/maryland-passes-transgender-equality-bill>). And of course, just over one year ago, the Supreme Court struck down portions of the Defense of Marriage Act (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/06/26/us/annotated-supreme-court-decision-on-doma.html?_r=0). On Wednesday Indiana joined the nineteen other states that now have marriage equality, and a federal court upheld a lower court ruling that had lifted the

marriage equality ban in Utah (<http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/marriage-equality-advances-after-wins-indiana-and-utah>).

Yet this week also brought the incredible sadness of another loss in the trans community: on Thursday morning Tiffany Edwards, a twenty-eight year old trans woman of color, was found shot to death in the middle of the street in Cincinnati (<http://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender/2014/06/30/fourth-trans-woman-color-murdered-june>). She was the fourth trans woman of color to have been murdered in the U.S. in the month of June alone. Over the last eighteen months four trans women have been murdered *in Ohio alone*. Here in New York, Islan Nettles [pronounced *élan*] was murdered just under a year ago. As Janet Mock commented at a rally in January: “[The death of] Islan isn’t the first death of a transgender woman of color, and she’s not going to be the last. I’m at risk every day myself just walking the streets of New York City. We all are.” (<http://www.out.com/news-opinion/2014/03/04/islan-nettles-trans-woman-nyc?page=full>) Even as our wider community makes major strides in various arenas, a crisis continues to unfold at the intersection of racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and classism. We can never forget how trans women of color – women like Sylvia Rivera, Marsha Pay-it-no-mind Johnson, and Miss Major – led the charge forty-five years ago at Stonewall. Nor should our wider narratives of victory erase the reality that vulnerability and exploitation, the enough-already anger that catalyzed this movement, is very much still alive and circulating in our community.

I imagine Christ standing with us in the midst of all this—on our highest of mountains, in the depths of our trenches, celebrating our victories, mourning our tragedies. I imagine him feeding us right where we are, fixing us with an intense gaze and asking us, *do you love me? do you love me? do you love me? You are on your way but by no means finished. Inasmuch as you*

have cared for, visited, clothed, fed, stood with the least of these my people, loved one another, you have done this unto me. This love continually carries us into the fray. It breathes the breath of the life-giving Spirit into our very bodies. It opens our eyes to see the differential ways in which we carry privilege, to name the places where we are broken, to celebrate and strengthen our interconnection. This love refuses erasure. It will not countenance abuse. It is infinitely larger, more expansive and comprehensive than we can possibly imagine. Ultimately, this love draws us more deeply, knits us more surely, into the paschal mystery itself, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This love invites us to be ever more fully and comprehensively a paschal people, a people on fire with the love of God, determined to be agents of its transformative power. I could feel this life-giving love as your diocesan float made its way through the streets today, inspiring waves of recognition from fervent thanksgivings to impromptu sidewalk dance parties. This is the infectious, expansive, unquenchable Spirit with which we have been seized.