

August 8, 2016, by Ray Bagnuolo

Almost twenty years ago, Matthew Shepard died on a buck fence like the one above, not far from where I took this picture. The police report said they found Matthew tied to the fence, viciously beaten and near death. When they lifted his head that hung unconsciously on his chest, the report stated that the only place they could see the whiteness of his face through the caked dirt and blood was where his tears had fallen.

It was October 7, 1998, Matthew was 21. He would die five days later of his wounds. A murder committed because he was gay.

We worshipped that Sunday October 11th with Matthew's life hanging in the balance. The story had caught national attention and at South Presbyterian Church in Dobbs Ferry all our pews were filled. I couldn't sit. I stood in the narthex against the light shining in through the open doors. I knew Matthew in my heart as I knew myself. It was just that he was the one that had gotten the beating this time instead of me or someone else. I searched for some hope, some aspect of God in it all. All I could think of, or maybe what I heard from the pulpit was that God weeped with us. Sorry, God. That wasn't enough. That's how I felt.

When Matthew succumbed to his injuries on Monday, I remember thinking that finally the world would realize what every person who identified as gay or queer understood - that we faced violence every day, from the slight of innuendo to the impact of blunt force objects. Surely, the world would finally wake up and understand what they had been doing or not preventing and say, "Oh my God, we are so sorry for what we have done and allowed to happen! How terribly wrong we have been and how sorry we are and how could we ever have thought that God wanted us to create or allow conditions to exist that could produce such terrible, terrible horror...."

It will be 18 years this October that Matthew was killed. I have not lost my hope in the capacity for the human heart to change; I have, however, been woefully early in my projections for that change. Through these last two decades and all the struggles within our denomination and society, I have learned not to underestimate the length to which others would go to stop or slow down change. Still, at our General Assembly in Portland, Oregon in June, I never expected to face the aberration of power and steely abdication of prophetic witness to blend so seamlessly in producing a dispassionate display of theological disengagement from the queer community by some of our own members.

The wall remains....

August 15, 2016 - Ray Bagnuolo

Ten years in the life of a church rarely registers in any measure of time. Yet, this decade of hard-fought changes for the welcoming of queer membership and leadership in the PC(USA) reflects an unparalleled shift of nearly forty-five years of unrelenting opposition; opposition marked by the objectification of the queer community -- the only plausible reason for which must have been to distance the acts of those seeking to purify the church from any sense of harm caused by their actions.

In my heart, I still cannot believe that anyone or group so intentionally desired to hurt others, yet they did. Their actions sent ripples of tacit approval for marginalization within the denomination

and into the public arena, where many crave for reasons and approval in their discrimination of queer folk. Then and now, I know these folks and their actions to be wrong; then and now, our denomination dismisses such actions as the free expression of their faith and conscience. Eloquent as that may be to say, I find it a distorted and cowardly response in this case, meant to assuage the threat of separation by those most responsible for the disruption in the first place.

It's as difficult to process this on a personal level, since I thought I had come to know many of these colleagues and their organizations that did their best to keep queer folk at a distance. I just came to believe, as I still do, that with time and knowing us their eyes would be opened, their hearts would be warmed and the recognition of harms they have caused would be a reason for repentance and reconciliation. This hope remains the motivation behind Overture 11-05 written and proposed by That All May Freely Serve. For me, the expectation remains that such a time will come, a time when we will lay low the rest of the theological and faux-theological wall that restricts full participation for queer folk in the church. When that time comes, I believe we will live and love into a new world that eliminates the ongoing violence of considerable resistance to those changes, even among those in the church whose support I would reasonably expect. Support then and now, woefully absent among major allied progressive groups who somehow believed that such a time could be other than now.

How could that be?

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