

The Church of the Transfiguration
The Third Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 9:51-62

Not to Destroy, But to Save

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I'll always remember my first New York City Pride march. It was 1994 – 28 years ago. Michael and I had just moved to Manhattan after living in Los Angeles for a year. We were both starting new jobs in the City, and it was an exciting time for us.

1994 was also a special year for the LGBTQ community. It was Stonewall 25, the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. As some of you may recall, Stonewall 25 featured a mile-long rainbow flag that was carried from the United Nations to Central Park. (To put things into context, this year is technically Stonewall 53. Yes, 53. Where does the time go?)

Anyway, one thing that really stood out for me at the 1994 march was the presence of anti-LGBTQ Christian protesters. Many of them carried large signs with biblical verses on them. The citations included references to how God hated gay people as well as warnings on how we would be destroyed just like Sodom and Gomorrah unless we repented.

I remember asking myself how people who supposedly believed in a faith tradition grounded in love could be so unloving. The protesters' hatred of LGBTQ people was so strong that they were literally praying for God's wrath to rain down from the skies and to destroy us.

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I wish I had known about today's gospel passage on that day 28 years ago. In today's gospel passage, Jesus actually *rebukes* his disciples who wanted God to send down fire from the heavens in order to consume their enemies.

Let's take a closer look at the gospel text. Jesus and his disciples were traveling to Jerusalem. Some of the disciples went ahead to Samaria to prepare the way for Jesus. Instead of being welcomed by the Samaritans, however, they were rejected.

Now this was not terribly surprising because the Samaritans and the Jews hated each other. Each saw the other as heretics. The Samaritans had their temple on Mount Gerizim, and the Jews had their temple in Jerusalem.

In fact, the hatred between the two groups was so strong that some Jews traveling from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south would go out of their way to walk around the region of Samaria – just so they wouldn't have to deal with any Samaritans. That's why Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan was so shocking to his original listeners – the Samaritan was almost never the "good guy."

Well, notwithstanding this hatred, Jesus' disciples James and John were still very upset by this rejection. So much so that they asked Jesus if they could "command fire to come down from heaven and consume" the Samaritans. Mind you, this was basically what the anti-LGBTQ protesters were praying for during the Stonewall 25 Pride march!

The Greek word used to describe what James and John were hoping would happen to the Samaritans – *analoō* – is a very harsh word. It means to “consume” or “devour” something so completely that it is utterly destroyed. Basically wiped off the face of the earth.

(James’ and John’s request was an allusion to the Book of Second Kings. In that chapter, Elijah – whom we hear about in today’s first reading (1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21) – asks God to send down fire from the heavens, which consumed 102 officers and soldiers of the evil king Ahaziah. Ahaziah ruled Israel from Samaria and was trying to arrest Elijah. Now maybe that’s a bit more than you ever wanted to know about the Hebrew Bible background to the text. But it’s helpful to understand the broader context of James’ and John’s request!)

And what was Jesus’ response to this request? He turned and “rebuked” James and John! In fact, some older manuscripts include an additional saying by Jesus that “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.” Let me say that again: “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.”

Now I’m not sure how many fire-and-brimstone anti-LGBTQ preachers have bothered to pay attention to this passage in Luke’s gospel. Or even if they did, they probably didn’t care. But Jesus clearly did not want his disciples asking for fire to come down from the heavens and to wipe out their enemies.

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I suspect that most of us would like to identify with the calm and level-headed Jesus in today’s gospel passage – as opposed to the rash and hot-headed James and John. But if we’re honest with ourselves, there are times in our lives when we are so enraged that we might pray for divine punishment or retribution on our own enemies.

To be honest, I’ve felt a lot like James and John over the past few days in response to the two recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings on gun control and reproductive health. I’ve rarely felt such a mix of rage, fear, and helplessness. Perhaps some of you might be feeling the same way as well.

First, the *Bruen* case. In this case, which was decided only three days ago, the Supreme Court struck down a 111-year-old New York state law that placed restrictions on the carrying of concealed weapons. This happened less than a week after a gunman opened fire in St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, during a potluck dinner. The gunman killed three parishioners who were showing him hospitality. On top of that, I just learned this morning about the recent shooting near a gay club in Oslo, Norway, that killed two people and resulted in the cancellation of Oslo Pride.

Second, the *Dobbs* case. In this case, which was decided only two days ago, the Supreme Court threw out the 49-year-old precedent of *Roe v. Wade*. As a result of the ruling, 22 states will immediately or almost immediately have an effective ban on a woman’s right to choose. But it doesn’t end there. One of the concurring opinions in *Dobbs* even called for the reconsideration of the precedents that established the right to contraception (that is, *Griswold*), to consensual private intimate relationships (that is, *Lawrence*) and to same-sex marriage (that is, *Obergefell*).

As Bette Midler wrote on her Twitter feed, “Get ready, gays. You’re next.”

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I mention these cases not as a political statement, but as a pastoral, ethical, and educational matter. As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry wrote in response to the *Bruen* case, the Episcopal Church has long advocated for the need for “commonsense gun violence protection laws” in order to save lives. And, as the Presiding Bishop wrote in response to the *Dobbs* case, the Episcopal Church has long held that access to reproductive health care is an “integral part of a woman’s struggle to assert her dignity and worth as a human being.”

Given the intense feelings that some of us may be having about the *Bruen* and *Dobbs* cases, today’s gospel reading is a timely cautionary tale about the dangers of wanting to consume, devour, or destroy the other. Many of us – especially those of us who are LGBTQ or from other marginalized communities – have been on the receiving end of this abusive behavior for much of our lives. However, we must remember that – like James and John – we can be on the giving end as well.

There is, of course, a place for righteous anger – and even rage. Jesus did, after all, overturn the money changers’ tables in the Temple. And the Stonewall Riots would never have happened if the ad hoc coalition of trans women of color and young people hadn’t fought back against the constant raiding of gay bars on that momentous last Sunday in June in 1969.

But the corrosive desire to consume, devour, and destroy those who are perceived to be our enemies is a different matter. It can lead not only to the destruction of the other, but also of our own souls. In fact, today’s epistle reading from St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (Gal. 5:1, 13-25) uses the exact same Greek word from our gospel reading – *analoō* – as a warning against destroying our enemies. Paul cautions us: “If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not *consumed* by one another.”

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And so my prayer for all of us on this Pride Sunday is to simply acknowledge our feelings – whether of joy, fear, sadness, despair, or rage – and discern how we might channel them into constructive and *faithful* action to further the Kingdom of God.

If you feel called to do so, check out the work of Bishops United Against Gun Violence. Or check out the work of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, of which The Episcopal Church is a founding member. Or come to the Pride reception sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of New York – which will occur at our parish right after today’s mass – and perhaps even march with the diocesan contingent.

As Harvey Milk once said, “I cannot prevent anyone from getting angry, or mad, or frustrated. I can only hope that they’ll turn that anger and frustration and madness into something positive.” So let us aspire to Milk’s call for positive transformation on this Pride Sunday. And let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.