
MEETING GOD FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Sermon for Pride Month – Delivered by Tina Madison White on March 12, 2022 at Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church, Washington DC

Reading: I Samuel 16:1-7 (NIV). Verse 7: But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Happy Pride Month! It is such a joy to return to my childhood home. Down there is where choirmaster Ken Lowenberg taught me to ring handbells. Over there is where I usually sat to hear Reverend Chadsey and Dr. Marvin preach. I attended my first dance at the annual Snow-Ball in the room beneath you. Peggy Crago was miffed when I ended the evening on the arm of another. I don't know where Peggy is today, but I imagine that she might feel a little relieved.

I could use this time to discuss the breadth of social justice issues that the LGBTQ community faces these days. God knows, they are legion.

But I want to explore something that some would consider more important than social justice. I want you to understand what it means for someone like me to have a relationship with God. I want you to understand your role in welcoming people to God, especially people who you might feel don't belong on the team.

When, at age 55, I transitioned from Tom to Tina, everyone assumed that I was motivated by a desire to live and dress as a woman. Far from it. In fact, I had spent most of my life wanting desperately to be a man.

As a young teen, I had earned the nickname, Reverend Tom. I sometimes dreamed of following in my father's footsteps. But I couldn't. I wish I could explain it, but I knew of no other way to experience the world than as a woman. Manhood never felt natural to me. It felt forced.

My confusion filled me with shame and self-loathing. At sixteen, I captured it in my journal:

Dear Tom,

*I hate your guts! Why must you be so miserably pathetic? Why can't you be happy?
What are you hiding?*

You are just a mask. A miserable, putty mask. A brainless stupid mask. I don't hate you. I pity and despise you. Why don't you just crawl into a hole and die?

I struggled in secret to fix myself. I enrolled in an all-boy's school. I hurled my body into one contact sport after another. I dated, I married, I fathered children. I consulted therapists, medical journals, religious texts. And I prayed. "God, please, fix me. I will do anything! Please, just fix me."

God never answered. Alone, I worked for 55 years to fix myself.

At 40, I entered into a second marriage. I had told Mary of my struggles with gender before proposing. But I assured her that I would keep it to myself. It was my disease. I would manage it on my own. For the next 15 years, I lost myself in making Mary happy – in being a devoted husband, a loving father, a pillar of the community.

But my affliction never left me. With each passing year, my depression and loneliness only deepened.

It was fear, not bravery, that eventually drove me to attend my first support meeting with other transsexuals. Forty of us crammed ourselves into a small meeting room in downtown Manhattan – each of us dressed somewhere along the gender spectrum.

I would like to be able to say that my first reaction was to appreciate the beauty in the room. It wasn't. My first thought was, "Oh, my God! I am in a freaking leper colony!"

But just as quickly, my mind completed the thought: "And I have never felt so at home. This is me. Oh my God, this is me!"

I listened as each attendee described their situation. Most had horrific stories: disowned by their families, disavowed by their churches, and kicked to the curb by their landlords and employers. Shelters refused them. Many carried the marks of repeated beatings.

The Tom side of me was horrified: "Have I really fallen so low? Are these the faces of my future? What, in God's name, did I ever do to deserve this?"

But the Tina in me was elated: "I am finally face-to-face with people I understand. I am in a room full of others who know what it is to be me. I am not alone anymore. Thank God, I am not alone."

But Tom had some fight left. Now that I had found myself, maybe I could fix me. I doubled down on my efforts to man up. I returned to competitive sports. I worked harder than ever to be Mary's Prince Charming.

Nothing. My despair deepened further – so much so that, for the first time in my life, I turned to thoughts of self-destruction. And that changed everything.

For no matter how disgusting the world might find me – even if I lost everything: my wife, my children, my friends, my career, my human rights – I felt certain that my number one duty was to stay alive.

It begs the question: Why do people like me feel that we must transform ourselves or die?

Here is what you need to understand. It isn't about body parts or clothing. We are driven to such desperate measures because we travel life feeling unseen, alone, and untouchable. We don't feel loved by anyone.

And it isn't their fault. How can people love or touch someone we never reveal?

When my mother used to share her cooing “I love you's”, with 6-year-old me, I hated it! I hated her for saying it. She was saying I love you to someone else. She couldn't love me. No one could. Before I approached anyone – even God – I had to fix myself. In the meantime, I would fake it to make it.

This is what so many fail to understand. Too often, people talk about LGBTQ people in terms of a lifestyle choice. It isn't. Given a choice, I would have given anything to be the little Tommy my mother so loved. I would have thrilled to follow in my father's footsteps.

Because I couldn't be that person, I chose to secret my soul. I walled it off from humanity. I walled it off from God. I walled it off from myself. I lived for 55 years, hiding a frightened, broken child inside who was alone in all the universe.

It was only when I faced the possibility of self-destruction, that I finally understood: Victory lay not in conquering my gender; it lay in learning to accept and to cherish what I had been given.

And, with that revelation, a miracle happened. After 55 years, God began to speak to me.

Throughout my life, I had repeatedly beseeched God to fix me, never getting a response. It was only after transitioning that I realized that it hadn't been God who had been absent. It had been me. You cannot have a conversation with someone unless you are both in the room together.

Forty percent of transgender adults who are alive to fill out surveys admit to having attempted suicide. We don't attempt it because we can't play dress-up. We do it because we pass through life feeling utterly unseen, untouched, and unloved – by anyone – even by God.

Living a lifetime in solitary confinement is profoundly lonely and dehumanizing. It will destroy anyone. To express and share our identity is not just a human right, it is a human necessity.

The question of sexual orientation is just as fundamental. When you have found the love of your life, you want to share this joy with your community, your friends, your family. What could be more human?

When your community or family refuses to accept your partner, once again, you feel your ability to experience and share your humanity torn from you. To this day, Mary and I feel a deep sense of loss when we cannot do something as simple as hold hands or brag about our wedding vows. Ask Mary. It's her favorite story!

350 years ago, when Anton van Leeuwenhoek refined the microscope lens, he became the first human being in history to look upon a germ. Before that, when someone fell ill, we questioned their soul. Today, we call a doctor.

Since then, other lenses have offered revelations about the earth, the atmosphere, the cell, the solar system, and the universe. We don't have a lens yet to understand people like me.

But I don't need one. I don't know what I am. But I do know this: For the first time in my life, I am happy. I live on the outside as I have always felt on the inside. I finally know what it feels like when I am loved. And I now have a self that I can give to the world, to my community, to my family. And I am giving them everything I have.

A few years before he died, my father told me that he had always been proud of me. But never so proud as now. He felt that I have given so much more to the world and to the family since bringing myself into it. I'm not half the man I used to be. But I am more than twice the person.

I am here today to give witness: I am how people like me can turn out, if only we are loved. I was loved by my family. I was valued by my employer. I was treated kindly by doctors, ministers, and police.

Some religious and political leaders like to call out the LGBTQ community as moral failures. They point to our struggles with homelessness, joblessness, drugs, alcohol, and health as obvious signs.

But I ask you: is that a judgment against the LGBTQ community, or against the families, churches, and employers who reject and malign them? If you found yourself homeless, alone, unlovable, and despised where would you turn to in order to fill the emptiness? What deals would you make if the establishment refused you food, love, and shelter?

Allowed to live and love, we can contribute a lot to society. We only ask that we be loved for who we are. It's all we have to offer.

But let's get back to God and Samuel.

God was right. We humans judge and label people as we see and experience them. We do it a lot.

"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance ... The Lord does not look at the things people look at.' ... Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has not chosen these.'" So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?"

"There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep."

Samuel said, "Send for him."

That runt of the litter chosen by God, was none other than King David.

What we fail to understand is that the labels that we use to define people – black, white, homosexual, sexy, transgender, fat, Christian, female – tell us more about ourselves than they tell us about the person we are labeling. The fact that I think "black" when I see an African American gentleman walking towards me tells me nothing about his heart. It tells me that society and I are more than a little preoccupied by the color of this man's skin. I know nothing of his heart. But I know something of my own.

For many of us, when we learn that a man is gay, our minds are filled with vivid images and horrible epithets. All of these are a product of our imaginations and media stereotypes. We know nothing of this man's heart. We know only what we have been trained to imagine.

I cannot avoid labels. But I can learn about myself from them.

What advice would Christ offer?

I was reading a book, *Queer Virtue*, by Reverend Elizabeth Edman. In it, she argued that being queer is not only compatible with Christianity, it lies at the heart of Christianity. I thought, "Wow, Elizabeth, that's step too far, even for me."

But she was right. To queer something is to toy with its definition and to question its boundaries. In his teachings, Christ queered all sorts of boundaries – between Jew and Gentile, Man and God, life and death, sacred and profane, rich and poor. Paul's insistence that in Christ there is neither male nor female is the essence of queering.

God's solution to labels then, is simple: tap your inner queer. Challenge your labels. What do they really mean? What do they really tell you about the human heart?

If you want to find a healthy, non-binary role-model, you need look no further than Christ.

Let us pray.

Dear God, as humans, we know that we cannot entirely escape labeling.

Help us to understand that the labels we use define us. They distract us from the qualities that you read so easily in our hearts.

Help us to understand how easily we are led away from you by leaders who seek to subdue and divide your flock with labels. Give us the courage to call out the bullies in our midst.

Remind us that, when our churches fail to invite people to your table based on a label, we are failing in your mission.

Remind us, God, as you reminded Samuel, to look for and love the person inside one another. To love them at home, at school, at work, on the sports field, and at church.

Remind us to welcome others to approach God as they are.

Remind us to trust to you God – the only being who can know their heart – to guide them.

Amen