

Trick or Treat

Jason Boyd

Luke 6:20-31

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Kirkland Congregational Church; Kirkland, Washington

The verses that Pat read from the Gospel according to Luke sound a little familiar to many of us, but not quite exact. Many Christians are much more used to hearing the version from Matthew, the *Sermon on the Mount*. This, the version from Luke, is often called the *Sermon on the Plain*. It shakes things up a little bit; it adds the “woes” to the blessings that we have heard many times before.

Today we mark All Saints’ Day – which is actually tomorrow. Today we lift to God all saints, known and unknown. In our tradition we know saints not as certain identifiable people, but as many people – vast numbers of them whose names will never be known to us. This day we pay particular note to those saints who have left the earthly lives, but we also remind ourselves, as we have just sung in the hymn, that they didn’t just live in ages past, but the world is still filled with them.

It is a tradition in many churches to mark those saints who have gone on from their earthly lives in the previous year. I want to introduce you to some of the saints that are on my mind today. Their names are Asher Brown, Seth Walsh, Billy Lucas, Tyler Clementi, Zach Harrington, Raymond Chase, Justin Aaberg, and Cody Barker. These are the saints I bring this year, and I’m bringing them because it was far too early for their names to ever come up in an All Saints’ Day service, far too early that anyone would have had to say goodbye to them – but if I don’t do this an injustice is being done.

These are the names of some of the young people you may have heard about in the news in the past couple months. They are all between the ages of 13 and 19, they all were bullied in different ways in their schools because they were gay or thought to be gay, and they all saw no other way out to escape the bullying than to commit suicide.

Asher Brown was an eighth grader in Texas, shot himself in the head after endless bullying by classmates. His parents tried to get school authorities to take his harassment seriously, but they wouldn’t. Seth Walsh lived in California, and he hung himself from a tree in his backyard after relentless bullying by classmates. Both Asher and Seth were 13.

Billy Lucas was a 15-year-old in Greensburg, Indiana. Friends reported on his Facebook page that he was constantly tormented and bullied by his peers, and one classmate reported that he told school administrators about the bullying, but they did nothing. His mother found him hanging in their barn.

Tyler Clementi was 18, a freshman at Rutgers University in New Jersey, and quite the accomplished violinist. In September, his dorm roommate and a friend of his roommate’s left their webcam on to catch Tyler during an intimate encounter with another male, and streamed it live onto the internet. Three days later, Tyler jumped off the George Washington Bridge; his body was found in the Hudson River.

Zach Harrington, 19, had found himself bullied for being gay throughout high school – and was forced to leave for his own well-being midway through his senior year. He had attended a City Council meeting in Norman, Oklahoma, where he lived. There had been a request to recognize October as LGBT History month. The request was approved, but not before 3 hours of anti-gay tirades by citizens. His family said that it was this “toxic exchange” that led him to take his own life.

Raymond Chase, 19, recently hanged himself in his Providence, Rhode Island dorm room. Justin Aaberg, 15, also hanged himself. Justin was bullied in his high school in Minnesota, in a school district that has refused to include LGBT people in its anti-bullying policies, and in a school which in 2007 where another student won a \$25,000 settlement from the district over bullying – at the hands of his teachers. The School Board defended the teachers’ actions and comments that led to the suit and settlement.

In Appleton, Wisconsin, Cody Barker, age 17, also faced anti-gay bullying in school. He took his own life in mid-September.

There are many more, countless more. It has long been known that anti-gay bullying results in increased amounts of suicides among LGBT youth, and those perceived to be LGBT. The young people I mentioned were just from the month of September. There are many, many more, throughout time and history, and we are dishonest with ourselves if we pretend that this isn’t going to continue. As long as there is homophobia; as long as there is heterosexism; as long as there is anti-gay bigotry, as long as it is socially acceptable to say that being gay is wrong or sinful; as long as the most common pejorative in our schools and among our youth is “that’s so gay” and school teachers and administrators – and parents -- won’t stop kids from saying that and other anti-gay comments; as long as the rest of us let anti-gay comments and thoughts and beliefs slide because someone says “it’s their religion,” gay kids are going to continue to kill themselves.

Many school districts, localities, and states, have pushed forward to implement anti-bullying legislation. But something funny often happens. Such legislation typically has widespread support – until the legislation specifically includes prohibitions on bullying gay kids. Then the opposition grows. It’s OK and desired to stop bullying, unless it’s bullying of gay kids.

This is where Jesus’ words come in. *Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.*

We have to face realities. The opposition to efforts to stop the bullying of gay kids comes from a deep-seeded belief that gay kids should be bullied. There is no other explanation. Statistic after statistic has been shown, the data on gay teen suicides has been available to anyone for years, the voices of those in pain are raised. And still it continues. That’s the reality. There are a great many people who, when it comes right down to it, believe that it’s just fine to bully gay kids.

A week and a half ago there was a nationwide event called Spirit Day. People were encouraged to wear purple to show their support for gay youth facing bullying, and in remembrance of those who felt they had no way out other than suicide. A man named Clint McCance who lives in Midland, Arkansas, took exception to this. Let me read to you his words which he posted on Facebook:

"Seriously they want me to wear purple because five queers committed suicide. The only way I'm wearin' it for them is if they all commit suicide. I can't believe the people of this world have gotten this stupid. We are honoring the fact that they sinned and killed themselves because of their sin."

*"Being a fag doesn't give you the right to ruin the rest of our lives. If you get easily offended by being called a fag then don't tell anyone you are a fag. Keep that s**t to yourself. It pisses me off though that we make a special purple fag day for them. I like that fags can't procreate. I also enjoy the fact that they often give each other AIDS and die."*

Clint McCance trumpeted his Christianity as he posted these comments. He was challenged on them, their obvious and utter lack of any connection to Christ. His response: *"I would disown my kids they were gay. They will not be welcome at my home or in my vicinity. I will absolutely run them off. Of course my kids will know better. My kids will have solid Christian beliefs. See it infects everyone."*

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Clint McCance wasn't just some guy on the internet. He was an elected member of the School Board in Midland, Arkansas. A man charged by the public with the School District's mission of "making a difference in the lives of students." Leonard Pitts of the Miami Herald, UCC member, writes, *"But can you imagine if you were a kid, lonely, alienated, struggling with your nascent sexual identity, daily tormented by classmates who think it's funny to call you a fag or dunk your face in the toilet, and you go to a school administrator for help and this guy is who you get?"* I think we have a good sense of the sort of difference Clint McCance wanted to make for kids like Asher Brown, Seth Walsh, Billy Lucas, Tyler Clementi, Zach Harrington, Raymond Chase, Justin Aaberg, and Cody Barker.

The Rev. Gene Robinson, Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, calls it as it is. He reminds us that, *"These bullying behaviors would not exist without the undergirding and the patina of respect provided by religious fervor against LGBT people. It's time for "tolerant" religious people to acknowledge the straight line between the official anti-gay theologies of their denominations and the deaths of these young people. Nothing short of changing our theology of human sexuality will save these young and precious lives."*

It really does come down to that. There is a straight line between anti-gay theology and the deaths of young people like the young saints I bring today. No amount of parsing or theological and etymological and philosophical gymnastics can get around it. You can't tell kids that their

own ability to love and need for love is wrong, and expect that they won't think there is something wrong with themselves. You can't tell them to keep quiet about who they are or that the law should treat them differently, and expect that they won't feel inferior. You can't say it is sinful to fall in love with someone of the same gender and expect kids who do fall in love with people of the same gender not to feel condemned. It is a condemnation. And it's a rejection, a declaration of worthlessness. How many more kids have to kill themselves until we are all ready to say that anti-gay beliefs are sinful? Anti-gay discrimination is sinful. Saying that "being gay is a sin," is sinful.

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Bishop Robinson continues, "*Just as many gay kids grow up in these conservative denominations as any other. They are told day in and day out that they are an abomination before God. Just consider the sheer numbers of LGBT kids growing up right now in Roman Catholic, Mormon, and other conservative religious households. The pain and self-loathing caused by such a distortion of God's will is undeniable and tragic, causing scars and indescribable self-alienation in these young victims.*" He hastens to add that "*even gay children not reared in religious households absorb messages of hate and damnation from homophobic religious leaders.*"

Our raising our progressive voices for justice and love is needed. Our lived example of the love of Christ, the justice of God for everyone is needed. Our willingness to shed any fears of upsetting someone's applecart when we point out that so-called religious views that harm gay people are anything but Christian, is needed. We cannot be shy about saying that no matter how loudly and how many times someone tries to justify their anti-gay bigotry by saying it's their faith; it's not. As recent events remind us, *this is life or death*. We cannot be silent. Jesus never worried about such things, and neither should we.

One year from now, All Saints' Day 2011, I don't want to have to have any more of these names to bring. One year from now, I don't want to have to have any more of these young people for whom this time in their lives should have been a treat, but it was just a big unfair trick.

Asher, Seth, Billy, Tyler, Zach, Raymond, Justin, Cody, and for all those unnamed saints who had the same experiences you did, you are blessed. This world failed you but no matter what Pat Robertson or Ken Hutcherson or the Pope or Clint McCance might have to say, God never will and God loves you as you are, exactly as you were created. People have hated you and excluded you and reviled you and defamed you and claimed it was on account of the Son of Man. They were wrong. They were wrong. You are blessed. You are loved. Surely your reward is great in heaven, for as we have sung in the hymn, the saints are folk like you and like me, and Jesus means for you to be one too. Amen.