

I Love You?

2/20/2022

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Flower Thrower, Banksy

Preaching on:

Luke 6:27–38

Every year at the church I served in Boston, once a year explicitly, we would send out an invitation to all of the drag queens in the Greater Boston metropolitan area to come to church. Come to church and sing in the choir, come to church and do the special music, do the anthems, do it all. It was a huge fundraising event that we called Drag Gospel Festival. It was a big deal for us. It was like Easter number two. We planned for this thing almost all year long. It was just a sort of a wild ride. And it was a fundraiser for LGBTQ refugees, who in their countries of origin, it was illegal to be gay or transgender. And they had fled to the United States in just the most harrowing stories that you have ever heard in your life. Fleeing imprisonment, torture, death threats, and landing in the United States with nothing, going into immigration detention as refugees. And then this ministry would help to get them out of immigration detention and get them through the refugee process here in the states. It was a wonderful event.

My colleague from that church, Rev. Molly Baskette, she has a new book coming out in November, and it is entitled *How to Begin When Your World Is Ending: A Spiritual Field Guide to Joy Despite Everything*. Some of you are probably familiar with Molly's writings. Here are some excerpts from her book in which she wrote about Drag Gospel Festival in 2015:

A few minutes into worship..., I noticed our associate pastor Jeff... sitting uncharacteristically

rigid in his chair, staring out, even as bits of feather boas were flying through the air around him. What could possibly be the matter?

I leaned over to him. "What's wrong with you?" I asked.

He unobtrusively pointed. "That guy over there," he answered. "Front pew. Left side. He's very angry, and agitated."

"I'll put the deacons on notice," I said.

...

As Jeff started reading scripture, I sat next to our twenty-seven-year-old moderator, Ian. I took his hand and asked him to pray with me. "That man—he's angry. I'm not sure what he's going to do," I said.

Because the week before: three mass shootings at college campuses.

And the previous summer: Dylann Roof killed nine people in their own church, for being Black.

And previous to that: that shooting in the Unitarian church, people killed for being liberal

Christians.... That was when the man stood up, slowly... He stepped over the front pew into the free space. Turning toward us, he began shouting.

And that was the beginning of the five most terrifying minutes and then most terrifying many months of my ministry. The deacons and Molly and I, we managed to diffuse the situation. This man whose name was Drew—believe it or not, he was wearing a name tag—he was not armed. And after screaming at us that drag queens don't belong anywhere in church and Jesus would never put makeup on his face and condemning us, he left. We were rattled, but we weren't defeated. Worship went on and we raised thousands of dollars for LGBTQ refugees. And it was a success.

But outside, Drew, who ran in some very, very scary circles. He posted these videos and photos of the event onto his social media. And from there, it got picked up by all kinds of people, all kinds of haters, with YouTube channels and conservative right-wing blogs. And from there, the hate mail and the death threats started rolling in for weeks and for months. They came in over the phones. They came in through the U.S. Mail. They came in over Facebook. They came in by email. People saying things like, "Oh, I guarantee you, somebody's going to burn that church down real soon," or "I sure hope somebody bombs that church," or "Somebody better do something about these people."

I was terrified. I was terrified of Drew. I was afraid that he might come back to the church this time armed after getting all this attention online. I was afraid he might show up at my apartment somehow because I was the one he was interacting with most up front, maybe he was thinking of me. I was scared that all the people who are going after us online might figure out who Bonnie was and they might start going after her. We called the police in, but the police weren't able to do a lot in this situation. They said just be vigilant. So I had to be vigilant. I started following Drew on his social media and I put out a Google alert on his name so that I could keep tabs on him. I had to keep tabs on him. Right?

I mean, there's no easy way for me to say this. Maybe I'm even trying to avoid saying it up here. But Drew was my enemy. He had made himself my enemy. He did that to me. I didn't do anything to him. And I had every right to be terrified of this man and what he had done to me and to be angry. I was afraid he was going to try to hurt me. I was afraid he was going to try to hurt my family. I was afraid that he was going to try to hurt my church. I assume that you probably haven't experienced anything quite like this, an online vigilante mob coming after you. But I know that you can just imagine how much stress I was under and how mortally afraid I was for weeks and weeks.

And so in that discomfort, in that pain, I turned to my Lord and I said, "Jesus, what do I do in this situation?" And what was Jesus' advice to me? You heard it read this morning in our scripture reading. "But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Right. So, here I am threatened, afraid, abused. And here comes Jesus, not to make it any easier on me, but to actually make it harder. In the situation I am in, this just makes it harder. What kind of advice is this? I'm the one who's being attacked. How can you seriously ask this of me?

Jesus, do you have some sort of secret plan here? I mean, help me out. Is this like reverse psychology or something like, okay, I'm going to make this sacrifice and I'm going to love Drew despite everything that he's doing to me, I'm going to love these people, despite what they're doing to me. And somehow, the power of love is going to get inside of them and infect them and they're going to change. And it's all going to turn out hunky-dory in the end. That's what love does, right, Jesus? That's the real plan, right, Jesus? And what does Jesus say? What does he say in our scripture reading this morning? "Nope. Give without hope of receiving anything back. Love without hope of it being returned. Doing good so that you're going to get some good outcome is not what I am talking about here." Well, what is that advice supposed to do for me when somebody calls up the church and threatens to hurt me?

Well, it all died down after a couple of months, but about two years later, Drew popped up in my Google alerts big time. Because Drew went to the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, that now infamous and deadly rally. And he was identified as one of the white men, walking through Charlottesville with a tiki torch at night and chanting "The Jews will not replace us."

This was a bit of a change in fortune here. I have to admit, it kind of felt a little bit good because now that Drew had been doxed, as they called it, now that he had been publicly identified and everybody knew who he was, he wasn't anonymous anymore. And I had the online outrage mob at my back, and it felt so good. Drew wasn't anonymous anymore. Everybody knew who he was. Everybody knew the kind of things that he did to good people like me. He lost his job. He was *persona non grata*. He was done for. And I felt like after what he had done to me, he got exactly what he deserved. Our reading this morning says, "God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Sure, fine, whatever. How about this for a Bible verse? "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Now you know how it feels Drew. You sow what you reap, couldn't have happened to a nicer guy, as far as I'm concerned.

About six months after Charlottesville, Drew was found dead at home. White nationalist and neo-Nazi leaders and influencers online were suggesting that he had taken his own life because he couldn't handle the online bullying from Antifa. Sitting there reading that news, I felt numb. I couldn't help myself. I felt like I had rooted for this outcome a little bit. I felt like I had been a part of that. I didn't want that. I wanted justice. I

just wanted justice. I didn't want a tragedy. I really didn't. But maybe when our desire for justice becomes unmoored from the power of love, we might not always be happy at what the justice we get looks like.

And in that moment, God sat down next to me and God just said, "Do you see now? It wasn't all about Drew. This was about you. It wasn't about just loving somebody to love them. It was about who you are. This is about not letting hate define your character. It's about allowing me to define your character. Won't you allow me to define your character?" And I said, "Sure, I get it. But I still just think it's terrible advice because I just don't think I'm good enough to love my enemies. I don't think I can do it." And God laughed at me. I heard God laughing. And God said, "Well, maybe it's not as hard as you think."

When my colleague Molly sent me a draft of her book, she reminded me of something I had totally forgotten about on that first day that I met Drew in 2015, this is what Molly wrote:

Jeff and Drew continued to talk at a distance, Drew spooling out his speech, Jeff answering him in love but with healthy boundaries. Finally, Jeff said, "You've said what you've come to say. You've been heard. Now it's time for you to go."

"But one other thing," Jeff said... "I love you."

Then Drew, turning to face us, said, "I love you too; I love all of you."

...

With that, Drew left. [The deacons] accompanied him down the side stairs, where he started sobbing... When he was out of sight, the congregation clapped and cheered, but Jeff stayed the cheering with a raised hand. This was a moment of relief, but not a moment of triumph over another human being.

I hadn't remembered that until I read it. I hadn't remembered that I told him, I love you. Now I remember. Now I remember what that moment felt like. It wasn't about being nice to someone who was doing something wrong. And it wasn't about being the perfect man of character. It was about a loving God, so much bigger than either of us stepping in. Do you think you can allow that God to step into your lives?

Well, I'm glad I said it. I'm glad God stepped in. And in fact, I'll let God step in again: Drew, I love you. You didn't make it easy, but I love you. And I'm sorry that I forgot.

Let us pray. God, thank you for being kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, even when I just can't stand it. Thank you for being kind to me when I'm ungrateful and wicked. Thank you for the love that is so much bigger than any of us. Amen.