

Walking With You Is Our Prayer

A Sermon by Rev. Heather Concannon & Otto O'Connor

April 2, 2017

Part 1 (Heather)

When I was fourteen, I came to understand myself as not being straight. And looking back, I was in a very supportive family and church and school, but I nevertheless struggled with it at first. I heard homophobic vitriol on the news, and subtle or not-so-subtle homophobic things from some of my peers at school, all directed at a community that I now understood myself to be a part of.

But when I came out to my friends in 10th grade, I remember Gale in particular being totally nonchalant about my new understanding of myself. Almost...annoyingly nonchalant. Her parents had gay and lesbian friends who she grew up with, she went to an incredibly progressive summer camp where she had queer camp counselors. I had steeled myself for drama, or at least some questions. But she just didn't care.

Well, it wasn't that she didn't *care*. It just didn't seem to change who I was in her eyes. Which, looking back, was a huge gift, to have a friend who didn't seem to have to do much to process that information about me.

I recently came across an old picture of me and Gale. In this picture, we are both smiling, baby-faced, with our arms draped over each other. I can see a piece of cardstock hanging around my neck from a piece of string.

When I was in high school, the Gay Straight Alliance worked to host the Day of Silence, which is an event organized in schools across the country each year. During the Day of Silence, participants typically wear a card around their neck, and the card explains that they are choosing to remain silent for the whole day in solidarity and recognition of the ways that LGBTQ individuals are forced into closets and pressured to remain silent about their identities, through stigma or bullying or heteronormativity. This action is a way to make visible, through extreme silence, the ways that certain parts of LGBTQ identities are silenced.

And then, when I looked more closely at the picture, I noticed that Gale, too, had a string around her neck. She, too, was participating in the Day of Silence as an ally. And I was so touched by this, remembering this friend who, at 14, 15, chose to walk with me in solidarity in a way that was public, visible, when I needed her most.

Sing: Walking With You

Part 2 (Otto)

As most of you know, I'm a transgender man, which means that when I was born the doctors said "it's a girl" and 27 years later I told everyone they were wrong and started living authentically as a man.

Coming out as trans was relatively easy for me. I'd been thinking about my gender identity and struggling with it for almost ten years. There was almost no one who I told who was surprised. Many of my friends already knew transgender people or were transgender themselves. I didn't

think that anyone was surprised when I told them. Sure, I was nervous sometimes telling people, but generally I was pretty lucky to know ahead of time that most people in my life would be fine with it.

But I had one friend who I was nervous to tell. Really nervous. He was a friend of mine who was otherwise very liberal but for some reason didn't agree with trans people. He felt that they should have rights, but otherwise he didn't think it was "right." His argument was that if you were a woman who felt like a man, you should just be a very butch woman. He felt that it invalidated his identity as a man when transgender men transitioned. He said it was like someone painting their face and claiming to be black. And there was always a part of me that wondered if he was right.

We had been quite good friends for ten years at this point. He lives in San Francisco and we had a weekly scheduled call and I had been ignoring him for weeks. He started to notice that I wasn't picking up when he called. I couldn't bring myself to talk to him. To tell him that I was trans.

Finally one day I realized that I couldn't hide it anymore and I called him and I told him I had something I needed to tell him. I made him promise he would still love me and then through tears I told him that I was trans and that I was going to transition. There was silence on the other end. And he said, "ok, are you sure? You've always seemed ok as a masculine woman..."

"No," I said, "no you don't get it. All these years I've been trying to live as a masculine woman, but the truth is I'm a feminine man. And those are different things."

He paused. "Wow. Yeah. You are." He said. "I've never thought about it that way, but I know you pretty well and you're right. You are way more a feminine man than a masculine woman." "I'm scared I'm going to lose you as a friend."

"Look, this will take some time for me to adjust to. But I love you and you are my family and no matter what I support you in whatever you are doing."

It didn't take him a long time to adjust. A few months later he said to me:

"I want you to know I've been wrong all these years. I thought I knew what it was to be trans. I thought I understood it. I told you so many times how I felt. I have to accept the fact that I didn't know, and that you are right. You have to be."

This meant a lot to me. My friend had realized that what matter more than whether or not he understood my transgender identity was the fact that it was who I was saying that I was. He put our relationship first and let go of his need to be right. One of the most important things we can do in this world is to let other people tell us their truths for themselves, and to do our best to honor that.

Sing: Walking With You

Part 3 (Heather)

When I was in seminary at Andover Newton Theological School, I met a new student in my very last semester. His name was Otto.

Expect, at the time, I knew his name was Otto, but I didn't actually know which pronouns Otto used. And this became a little bit of a problem.

You see, this new student and I happened to be in an online Christian Ethics course together, and the coursework was due every Monday at 5pm. And so, from 2pm to 5pm, Otto and I would find ourselves, week after week, doing our online coursework together at the very last minute.

And we would chat, and compare notes on the readings, and roll our eyes at the commentary that other students made, and we slowly became friends.

But, the thing was, I didn't know how to talk to other people about my new friend. I tried lots of tricks I learned in queer community, when I didn't know someone's pronouns and they weren't around to ask. I tried to talk around using pronouns, using Otto's name an awkward amount of times, "Oh yes, Otto and I both have time between UU worship and our evening classes. Otto and I plan to work in the library together but I think Otto has done Otto's homework already this week". And, in the event that I backed myself into a grammatical corner, I would resort to the gender-neutral "they" as the safest bet.

As Otto mentioned, he came out as transgender at 27, which was around the time that we met. He and I were recently talking about that semester when we met each other, and he asked me recently what pronouns I used for him when I first met him. I admitted that I didn't know, to which he said "Heather, why didn't you just *ask me??*"

And I thought hard about that question.

You see, I consider myself to be a pretty good ally to the transgender community. Identifying as queer, I have always seen trans folks as part of the larger queer community, walking together. I had many friends and community members come out as transgender in college. I had been taught that if you didn't know someone's pronouns, you should just ask, that that was always better than mis-gendering someone. I was adept at remembering to switch pronouns for people when they announced that they were using new pronouns. I knew that it wasn't polite to ask trans people about their bodies, or their names before their transition, or inquire after the details of surgeries or hormones.

But when I met Otto, I didn't just ask him which pronouns he used. I told myself that I just didn't really feel like I needed to know right away which pronouns he used. I figured I'd figure it out in due time, and I told myself that I was practicing radical non-curiosity about things that didn't affect me.

My intentions were all good, for sure.

But I realize that there was also a part of me that was not asking about pronouns to avoid the potential awkwardness of asking-- the potential of putting someone who might not be ready to talk about it in the position of needing to answer a question that they did not know how to answer, or the fear of offending someone by asking what pronouns they used. And, I had made those gaffes before-- I had asked a friend a few years earlier, when he was in the middle of coming out as transgender, if he wanted me to use different pronouns for him, and he said, looking around, "umm... I really don't want to talk about it... please don't ask me that."

But the impact of me not asking was that Otto didn't know whether or not I was someone who would be supportive of him. Asking for his pronouns would have been a way to communicate that, even if he hadn't been ready to answer the question.

And the impact was that I didn't see Otto for who he was, and I assigned him pronouns that weren't right for him.

In walking with people in marginalized communities, there can be paradoxical requests about what it takes to walk with someone well.

And in talking with Otto, I remember that it was not about memorizing a list of rules-- though there are some universal things that are more or less polite to inquire about-- but it is more about being in relationship with an individual person, who may have particular perspectives or needs or preferences about how they are treated. And it was my job to learn about those preferences and humility, to apologize when I've messed up, and to do my best to walk with the person in front of me.

Sing: Walking With You

Part 4 (Otto)

So, Heather and I have been teaching Coming of Age together this year, which is a program for middle school youth here at the church. During our retreat I noticed at one point that everyone was being loud and it was hard to get everyone's attention. So I started using my voice. My deep-ish, loud, men's voice to get their attention. And not just when I needed to get their attention, but when Heather was trying to get their attention. As in, Heather would start talking, and I would, more loudly just yell out "Hey! Listen up!" I thought I was helping. I mean, my voice was deep. People would listen. Often it worked to get their attention.

After I did this a few times, Heather just kind of looked at me in a way that made me know that my "helping" wasn't so welcome.

(Heather: It was like this)

I stopped and afterwards she pulled me aside.

"I'm sorry, my voice is just louder." I said, feeling a little defensive.

"Do you know how long I've been a camp counselor?"

Our conversation was interrupted, and I reflected on what she said. And she was right. I was kind of assuming that she couldn't manage the group because her voice was too high. I thought they would pay attention to me because my voice was deeper. Because I'm a man. Even though Heather has years and years of experience on me when it comes to classroom management and working with youth. Years.

But still I did feel a little defensive. I mean could I really have spoken over Heather in this way without thinking about the gender implications? I'm trans! I know what it's like to have men do talk over me like this. To have men assume I needed their help when I could handle the situation perfectly well myself. When I was the expert, even. And yet, that's what I was doing. Heather talks about feeling like a pretty good ally to trans people. I think sometimes I feel like THE BEST ally to women because I know what it's like. But the truth is that I'm not. Because we all fall short. And that's part of the work.

And it was a gift for Heather to point this out to me. But because she had given me this gift of reflecting back to me a way that I was acting that I had not realized. Furthermore I value my relationship, both professional and personal, with Heather, and this is a way for us to remain in authentic relationship. Sometimes we forget how big of a deal it can be for people who are marginalized to point out these kinds of interactions. I could have gotten angry or told her that she was being too sensitive.

Instead I swallowed my pride and defensiveness and apologized, I thanked her for telling me, and I make a concerted effort to change my behavior in that class around getting their attention.

Sing: Walking With You

Part 5 (Heather)

Otto and I share these stories about ourselves because we know that neither of us are perfect. I know I have gotten the message over my life that it's a shameful thing, to make a mistake, and that sometimes has stopped me from taking a risk, like when I didn't ask Otto about his pronouns. It would have been a risk, and I didn't want to make a mistake.

And sometimes when we take risks, we really mess it up. We learn things about the world by messing up, though. So often adults strive to be perfect, as the world has taught us, bit by bit, that messing up is the end of the road, when in fact we know that we cannot improve at something if we do not practice our skills.

The amazing thing is that in talking about it later, both of these situations, Otto and I both took risks and we both trusted the strength of our relationship with one another to hold those risks. Because my experience has shown me that it can be incredibly valuable to be able to talk about the ways that identity plays out in our interpersonal relationships. It allows us to understand experiences that we do not personally have.

I'm sure that you noticed, as we were telling our stories, that we each had an experience of telling our story from the side of someone who is marginalized in society and from the perspective of someone who is empowered in society. Otto is male, and I am cisgender, which means that when I was born and the doctors said "it's a girl!" they just happened to be right. Each of us has complex and intersecting identities, shaping our experiences in the world.

Friday was Transgender Day of Visibility, and as we introduced pronouns on our nametags this week because nametags show that we as a community care about trying to walk with the transgender and gender non-conforming community. We are showing, through our nametags, and like our rainbow flag out front, that UUAC is a community that walks with transgender people, and where transgender people walk among us. We can't promise protection, and we can't promise *perfection*, but we can promise presence. We can promise to walk with.

Sing: Walking With You

Part 6 (Otto)

And it's important to be visible, but it can also be vulnerable. As a transgender person, I feel that it's important for me to share that status with you so that you have examples of transgender people in your lives and in places of leadership. And it's an important part of who I am and a part of myself that I love and who has made me who I am. But I have to be honest that it's scary to focus so much on this part of my identity in a sermon with you. I worry that being transgender

will become all people think I talk about. That I'll be the "transgender minister" instead of a "minister who is transgender."

But visibly being an ally to transgender people is also powerful, with these nametags for example, in that it is a clear sign to any transgender person walking in the door that we are ready to walk with them. But there is vulnerability as well. Because as Heather said, we might make mistakes.

The word vulnerable comes from the Latin root having the ability to be wounded. When someone shares an identity with you, a queer identity like Heather did, or a trans identity like I did, they risk rejection. And that risk of rejection is present every I tell someone about the fact that I'm trans. But it's worth it is me because I need to share this about myself to feel authentic. Not every transgender person feels this way, or should be expected to share this aspect of themselves, but for me, it leads to deeper connections.

And I think vulnerability and authenticity are at play for all of us. It's vulnerable to ask for what we need. It's vulnerable to say when something someone said or did was hurtful. It was vulnerable for Heather to ask me to stop talking over her. And it was vulnerable for me to admit that I was wrong. But our relationship is built on authenticity and that vulnerability helped us move past that and learn from each other.

And in these ways when we walk with someone, we are opening ourselves up to being hurt. We are allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. And that is our prayer of presence. It's a powerful thing, make space for someone to be authentic.

Friend, let's find ways in which we can be vulnerable and visible with each other so that we can be authentic in our relationships and as allies in this community and in our world.

Let us say together Amen.

Amen