



Transgender Welcome

A Bishop Makes the Case for Affirmation

By Bishop Gene Robinson January 2016

Preface

This document is a love letter to the transgender community, both a “thank you” and a “welcome” to transgender people. It comes out of my experience of learning so much—about sexuality, gender, and myself—from transgender people. It springs from my belief that God is enriching the lives of us all by bringing transgender people and their insights into our experience and understandings. This resource is an attempt to recognize transgender people as the gift they are to our understanding of God and God’s love.

God is up to something, as God often is! And this time, it’s personal.

Introduction

One of the most striking things about the Gospel of John in the Christian Scriptures is that the author begins with his conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Son of God, the long-awaited messiah, and the perfect revelation of God. Reading John's Gospel is a little like picking up a whodunnit mystery and then reading the last page first—beginning with the answer to the whodunnit question and then returning to the first and succeeding pages to see how the inspector builds a case and gets to the answer. John wants the reader to know exactly where he is going to wind up.

Similar to John, I want the reader to understand from the beginning where I am headed. I am setting out to affirm that transgender people are children of God, worthy of respect, valued for their perspectives, and regarded as God's gift to our religious communities and secular cultures. Their experiences will challenge society's normative ways of thinking about gender, call us to a broader-than-binary understanding of gender, and expand our appreciation of the beauty in diversity of God's creation. I argue that the emergence of transgender people into the consciousness of the wider religious and secular communities is a gift of God, given for the benefit of all, and that our response should be affirmation, welcome, and celebration.

You may be wondering why a white, gay, male, Episcopal bishop would find himself standing with and standing up for transgender people. Partly, it is because Jesus—who, as a Christian, I believe to be the revelation of God—says that when Christians treat a marginalized and discounted human being with disdain or compassion, it is as if we are treating Christ and God that way. Partly it is because transgender people are helping me to better understand the unearned privilege I am afforded simply because I am cisgender, or not transgender. But I am mostly making this case for the full and joyful acceptance, affirmation, and inclusion of transgender people because I know them and because they have changed my life for the better. Just as it is for gay and lesbian people, living authentically is the most powerful witness a transgender person can make. That authenticity may be lived openly, if they so choose, for all the world to see. But that world is not always safe for transgender people, and for that as well as other reasons, a transgender person may choose to live their authenticity quietly. Whether public or private, authenticity is the goal and its own reward.

Two transgender women figure prominently in my education. The first—for privacy reasons, let’s call her Joan—was someone who transitioned within the community of one of the New Hampshire Episcopal parishes. Joan did something that was generally not recommended, at least at the time: remaining in the community in which you were formerly known as one gender, while transitioning to the other. Joan was an accomplished lawyer and avid, avocational videographer. She was deeply committed to her friends and to her parish, and she was not going to leave either behind as she transitioned. In being so courageous and open about her journey, she brought an entire parish of adults and children along with her for her journey. All of us benefitted from the experience that she was graceful enough to share with us.

The second transgender person I came to know well—let’s call her Jane—I met while working for LGBT rights and marriage equality in the New Hampshire Legislature. What I remember most about her is her generous spirit and the articulate and powerful way she told the story of her life. Living as the male gender she was assigned at birth, Jane had made her living as a carpenter and building contractor. Unlike Joan, however, she experienced much resistance, anger, and hostility in her work environment. Ultimately, she left her work as a carpenter, took an intensive truck-driving course, and became a professional truck driver—as the woman she knew herself to be. Her endurance and her commitment to living her life authentically knew no end. I was humbled, challenged, and inspired by her courage and integrity, and it was my privilege to call her a friend.

In one of the most important—and least remembered—parts of Jesus’ conversation with his disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” [John 16:12–13a] I take this to mean that God’s revelation of God’s self was not complete at that moment in time, even at the end of Jesus’s life. Jesus seems to be saying to his disciples, “Look! In these last three years, you have learned so much and you have changed in so many ways. But there is so much for you—and for those who will follow in your footsteps—to learn about God and God’s will for humankind. But it is simply too much for you to bear, now, all at once. And so, I will send the Holy Spirit, who will teach you and guide you into a fuller, deeper understanding of God’s truth.”

Surely, God’s Spirit has guided humankind into more and more truth, as we could bear it. For countless generations, many used Holy Scripture to justify slavery. Can any person of faith imagine that it was not God’s Spirit leading us to love, value, and honor our fellow human beings, regardless of their race, that ultimately taught us to end the enslavement of all people? How long has a patriarchal church and synagogue used Scripture to justify the denigration and subjugation of women?

Surely, it is God's Holy Spirit that is leading people of faith ever increasingly to understand the equality and worthiness of every human being as a child of God. For many Christians and Jews, the Spirit leading us into all truth has recently involved a new understanding, acceptance, and welcome of those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, recognizing them as the children of God that they are. And now, for many people of faith, that journey toward a deeper understanding of God and God's love for humankind leads us to the affirmation, acceptance, and welcome of God's transgender children.

This resource is meant to assist people of faith in that journey.

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