

Christ Episcopal Church Valdosta
 The Third Sunday in Epiphany, January 24, 2021
 The Rev. Dr. James C. Pace

First, complete transparency. I preached this sermon in the Diocese of New York nine years ago. I have made major changes to this rendering, to be sure; the guiding theme and the main characters, however, remain the same. Humbly speaking, to me, it is one of my all-time favorite sermons. I offer it in the hope that you hear the Holy Spirit as powerfully as I witnessed it.

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls four of his disciples and for good reason. In the midst of their everyday lives, Peter, Andrew, James and John were called to new tasks. Tasks that would take their best efforts ... they were to tell others about how Jesus loves people and to describe the scope and power of that love in action.

The following story happened about 28 years ago ... I still can't get over how time flies ... and yet the events are as clear as if they happened yesterday. At the time, one of the Episcopal Churches in and around Nashville, TN. (I will call it St. Anonymous), lost both of their priests and there would be some lag time before a new rector could be named. The bishop convinced me to help them out by celebrating the Holy Eucharist every Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at **6:15am**. What time in the morning did I say? Yes. **6:15 am**. And during that same time frame, in addition to my faculty role at the Vanderbilt University School of Nursing, I was also a hospice chaplain. One of my patients was a 31-year old African American male who was terminally ill with AIDs who I will refer to as "Lynn." Lynn lived in subsidized housing near the fairgrounds and had a background in the ballet. Please recall that in the late 80's and early 90's, a diagnosis of AIDs was associated with great fear, stigma, homophobia, religious discrimination, and isolation. One day I was visiting Lynn in his apartment and he asked me what I was going to be doing the next day. I told him that I would begin the day by the saying the Holy Eucharist at St. Anonymous at *6:15am*. And out of the blue, he asked if I wouldn't mind swinging by and picking him up so that he could go with me.

Now just a word or two about that early congregation at St. Anonymous. What I am about to say is not meant to be taken negatively, but rather as a fair description of a group of the faithful at the time. They were for the most part **extremely conservative**. All white. 80-90% male. Extremely conservative. Most middle to later aged. Upper class. Good credentials. BMWs and Caddys in the parking lot. Many were evangelicals who embraced their religious zeal with enthusiasm. By the way, did I mention that they were conservative?

Now just a word or two about Lynn. Lynn was very proud and very Out in terms of his orientation and was flamboyantly dramatic. Very outgoing. Never a stranger. But nobody pushed Lynn around either. He did not care one way or another about how you regarded him. He was black. Gay. Unapologetic. And very Matter of Fact. Sadly, he had been diagnosed with AIDS only several months previous to his referral for hospice care, AZT as a single drug had not helped him and his immune system was profoundly compromised. His was a deadly combination of attributes, especially in those days.

As to his request, I heard myself reply to Lynn, and rather emphatically: "**Yes. Ok. Sure!!** I'll be here at 5:30am sharp in the morning. Be ready and at your front door. If you snooze,

you'll lose because I won't have time to knock on your door." I was thinking to myself, of course, that this was all smoke and mirrors. Lynn loved to sleep to all hours in the morning and early afternoon.

And so, the next morning, I turned onto the road that runs beside Lynn's apartment, not expecting to see him. But there he was. **THERE HE WAS!** (all capital letters). A bright purple bandana to his forehead. A pair of brightly colored pants cut off at mid-thigh. Earrings to both ears. Bracelets jingle-jangled to both wrists and a type of footwear that flip-flopped as he walked. He flopped into the passenger seat and I was speechless. I literally did not know what to say. And he just stared at me. Finally, I said: "Is that what you are going to wear to church?" He crisply replied: "Yes, it is, priest. And don't start with me or you'll be kicked to the curb. If people do not accept me the way I am and for who I am, then I'll just get out right now and form my own opinion about your Episcopal Church whose signs read: "All are welcome." I sat there for awhile thinking. Wasn't too much I could say to that. So, I said: "Alright. Let's go, then."

We arrived at St. Anonymous and it was still dark, of course. In flip-flopped my friend, head held high. Well, you should have seen the way that Lynn attracted attention as he made his way down the aisle to sit in the very first row. And the looks they exchanged among themselves and then at me: *priceless*.

To make a long story short, Lynn became a regular. I would pick him up almost every MWF when he felt well. At first, people ignored him. Or tried to. Lynn purposefully learned all their names so that he could go right up to them at the Exchange of the Peace and exchange the same loudly while called out each of their names.

And after a while, it didn't take long, they discovered that he had AIDS and that he, of course, was one of my hospice patients. Attendance dropped off for a while. There was a request that he sit in the back row, supposedly so that he would receive communion last. There was a great fear of contagion then ... among other things. Another asked me to convince Lynn not to receive communion at all. Some people just did not speak to him because of either his orientation or diagnosis or color or the way he acted or some combination of any or all. I had many a phone call where I explained that the current science stated that AIDS could not be spread through the common cup or with the shake of a hand.

One morning as we were driving to church, I asked Lynn if he felt ostracized by the group, or by some, for any reason. His reply: "Priest, they don't know it yet, but they are starting to really like me. And I am helping each of them to discover who Jesus really is. And you know what? We are going to get there because they need me." I marveled at his faith, determination, strength, courage, stamina, faith, and love for the Lord Jesus.

One person cornered me one day and asked me not to bring him to church anymore or she would stop attending and cancel her pledge, which she reminded me, was very sizable. Lynn kept coming and she didn't for a good bit of time. But finally, she starting attending again. And one day after church and over in the kitchen where we all had coffee before heading back out into the world, I noticed that she and Lynn were having a serious conversation over in a corner. Later, I asked him what that was all about. His reply was that they had talked about the ways that Jesus loved all people regardless of their gifts and their flaws and their pasts. Turns out, she had asked Lynn to forgive her for the various ways she had treated him.

Soon thereafter, Lynn was admitted to the Nashville General Hospital on the Cumberland River's edge. Nashville General was the community hospital at that time and it had its own small AIDS ward. He had an outbreak of Cytomegalovirus (CMV) to his retinas. The doctors tried everything to save what little eyesight he did have. I visited him one day during his hospitalization. I soon found out that almost everyone in that congregation had made their way to visit Lynn. I was amazed. And I marveled that the people who had initially had the most problem with him were now his most frequent visitors. They brought food and cards and prayers. Eventually, this story made its way to the bishop. Bishop George Lazenby Reynolds. May he rest in God's peace. And after Lynn was discharged, sponsors from St. Anonymous presented Lynn to the bishop for private confirmation at the Diocesan Office because we knew he would not last until the bishop's next visit. That was one of the happiest days in Lynn's life. He wore a fur coat over a tuxedo! Several weeks later, scores of people from the congregation and the community attended his Memorial Service. What a testimony to how Christ's love brings us together regardless of our differences. And maybe there is a lesson somewhere in there for our prayers for our nation today.

This is the story of how people come to be called and committed to the Lord. Sometimes it is not easy to see how much the Lord Jesus loves each of us, or others. Sometimes we don't understand our brothers or our sisters for one reason or several. But Lynn was the perfect example of catching people up in the net of God's love and then it was their turn to catch him up in their nets of Jesus love. God's love is freely given to us so that we might in turn share it with others, and tell the story.

The Lord Jesus comes to each and every one of us every day, very, very, very early in the day, and says: Follow me today. Follow me and let's go out and catch people up in my love. The Lord God counts on us to continue this discipleship, to continue the work of Peter, James, John, Andrew, Lynn, George Reynolds, and countless others across the years. When we see that love made manifest with the joy that it gives our hearts, we are witnesses to the reality of Christ Jesus and the power of Epiphany.