

“Struggling with Integrity”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

When I prepared this sermon I thought it would be a good week to talk about integrity, because that fits with the Scripture. I will explain that in a little bit. And, I thought about John McCain, but man, it has been two weeks of John McCain. I kept going on [researching John McCain], and everything I found has been talked about over and over again. There is nothing I can tell them [the congregation] that they haven't heard already.

So, I thought that is alright to have him on the cover, because we can honor this great man and his integrity, but I decided to kind of go a different direction. It is all my daughter's fault so when you see her, you give her a hard time.

She said, “Dad, let's watch the show I have been telling you about. We watched one episode of this in the first season, about a year ago, and we have to watch the next one.”

So something I never thought I would do in a sermon is give an illustration about a TV show called “Queer Eye.” So, if you have watched it you know, this is from season two episode one. This is a story - or a show - about five gay gentlemen who come together and meet with people who need help to get a makeover. Now, they joke about the makeover being their face, or their hair, or whatever it is - but the makeup goes beyond that. It goes to a makeover of their lives, how they look at themselves, how they offer themselves to the world.

This time, in this particular episode, that was truly marvelous, they went to Gay, Georgia. That is an actual town of 89 people. In this town they have this amazing woman. Her name is Tammy.

Tammy is this amazing African-American woman. Her grandmother started their church. It is a Holiness Church. She started it as a share-cropper who was illiterate. She started the church around her kitchen table, trying to find somebody who could read, who would help them understand their Bibles. So, they got together and formed this church and, all of these years later, it is still running and growing in this tiny little town.

The person who introduced her and encouraged the TV crew from the show to come to Gay, Georgia, and to meet Tammy was, of all things, this very big, round, white guy with boots and a cowboy hat - not the kind of person you would think would be somebody to get this “Queer Eye” show to meet this African-American woman. But sure enough, he said, “You got to come and help her,” and told her story to the TV crew.

The story was remarkable. Not only did she have a grandmother who started the church, but this woman, Tammy, is a teacher. But, after she is done with a whole day of teaching, she goes to different homes and she tutors children in how to read, so that they can make it through school - so they can read their Bible. Then she goes home, throws a meal on the table, and then she goes back out and does all of her church activities. How in the world [does] she have time?

He [the TV show narrator] said, “She has time for everyone else, but not enough for herself, and she needs a makeover. And, more than that, last year her mother, her sister and Tammy got cancer at the same time - and she lost her mother to cancer. Tammy is now on the other side of cancer, as is her sister. They are survivors - cancer survivors. But, amazingly, with all of this going on, she has continued to thrive. With just a little bit of hair, she is making it.” And, the gentleman from the show said, we have got to meet this woman. We need to give her a makeover.

So they come in and they go to meet her, and she is just the most delightful person you ever want to meet. But, she says to them, “I don’t want anything for myself. What I want you to do is makeover my church.”

They have this great big community building because, in a town of 89 people, you have a bar and you have a church. [Laughter]

I served a church [in a town] like that once and the bar wasn’t a bad thing. (I’m digressing, but I remember when our daughter was about 8 years old, we took her back to our first church, and she said, “All we have ever done is go to bars and church.” [Laughter.] But, I said, “The bars are where you go for the Friday fish fry. If you are going to meet anybody in a small town that is where you go.” She [Hannah] was appalled. [Laughter.]

But in a town of 89, the bar is doing well and she [Tammy] wanted the church to go well. They had built the foundation - which was concrete. They built the walls, that were dry-walled in, but there was nothing else to this building. So Tammy asked them [the TV folks] if they could makeover that.

They thought about it and said, “OK. But we are not going to quite stop there.” They went over to her house and it was a complete mess, because she is single. She has a son who is grown, but he came home when she got sick and nobody kept up with this [keeping the house clean], because they have had so many things going on.

These five guys [from “Queer Eye”], each one has his own special thing that he does: one does hair, one does clothing, another one does other things. They each have their own little thing. They went in and said they were going to fix Tammy up. They went through the house and were just appalled, as only five gay men could be in a dirty house. [Laughter.] They looked at it and said, “What a mess!” They fixed it up. Then they went into the son’s room and they were even more appalled, because he had let it go to just trash and they gave him a hard time. They went on and started meeting and talking to Tammy.

An amazing thing developed. They didn’t know, and they found out, that the grown son was also gay and had been ostracized, or felt unwelcome, in the house that his great-grandmother had started.

He came home, only because he wanted to be there for his mother. Part of the reason why his room became such a mess was because he felt so down on himself - so beaten down in the rural, deep south - that there was no place for him in his home, in his community or in his church.

So they [the television folks] went about, cleaning everything up and getting everything going.

Then Tammy sat down with the five of them and started telling her story. She said, "I feel so bad. Before I got sick, I wasn't sure what to do with my son and then, when I got sick, I realized what was truly important about the Gospel." She said, "When you are dying, all the peripheral stuff falls away and you focus on the important things. And," she said, "what was important to me was God's love and acceptance and grace."

She said, "I couldn't be separate in any way from my son one minute longer. I sat down with him and I looked him in the eye, and I said, 'Forgive me.'"

He looked at her and said, "No, mom, I forgave you a long time ago."

Tammy said, "No. Forgive me for not loving you as openly and lovingly as I could. I never stopped loving you, but I didn't show it as much as I should have."

Now those five gay gentlemen cried, because, they said, "Over and over again, we hear people who have lost their family, because they were never accepted and loved, especially in the church."

After they were done going to Tammy's home, the five gentlemen went to check out the church - to see the community building and the Sanctuary.

Only four of the gentlemen went in to the church. One of the five gay gentlemen, Bobby, stayed outside. He wouldn't go in. He grew up in a very conservative church in Missouri. When his family found out he was gay, at the age of 15, they kicked him out and he had to make his way in the world at such a young age.

He wouldn't go into the church, because he felt that no one in a church would ever love him and accept him. He had such anger and rage. After they had been together a while and he had watched Tammy, and had *slowly* begun to listen to her and accept her, and warm up to her, she sat him down - as only a good, Christian, African-American woman can - and she told him the story about her son, saw his forgiveness and then lit into him.

Tammy said, there are many wonderful Christian people who live the Gospel - who love, who accept, who believe in grace and trust God's judgment - and do not jump in the way. They understand the difference between God's laws and human law.

She said all of that in such a way that he was *freed* and able to walk into the church again and, by the end, was in worship with she and her son and the congregation, praising God as only the Holiness Church can. It was beautiful.

By the end of the show Tammy walked up to each one of those five men, she named them by name, and told them how God had gifted them, and how God loved them and how she knew it, because of the gifts God had given them. She went into detail about each one and their unique gifts - not only the talent they can see on television - but she named off all of the special, unique blessings that each one had, and they just fell apart.

See, they [usually] went to shows expecting to *give* the makeover and in this episode they *received* a makeover from her: a makeover of acceptance, a makeover of unconditional love. They saw that a Christian person could have integrity and courage.

She had gotten up in that conservative, deep-south, black church and she told about her love for her son and her commitment to loving everyone the same. She said that was God's blessing as well to every human being. Integrity takes courage. It takes a stubborn commitment to sharing truth, when is truth not always accepted and wanting to be heard; but she did it anyway and they were profoundly changed.

I hope you watch the episode. You can see it on Netflix, season 2 episode 1.

But the reason I'm telling that story today is because, how do you get an African-American church in the deep south, an understanding of the Bible that allows you to embrace, when you can quote Scriptures from Leviticus or Romans, or wherever else you want to quote in the *few* passages that talk about homosexuality?

I believe you go back to this passage from Mark that talks about food laws. They are biblical. But Jesus just pushed them aside and said, "They are outward. I'm worried about the heart."

I think to myself, "Isn't it the same thing?" Your sexuality is an outward expression of who you are to other people; but it's not who you are. None of that is - whether you are homosexual, heterosexual, or bi-sexual, or whatever else you want to call yourself. That isn't who you are, or whose you are. That is an outward expression that people might notice or see or get to know, but that isn't who God knows you to be - that is the inward expression that is deeper.

That is why I believe Tammy is right to embrace her son. Tammy is right to seek forgiveness, as well as offer it, because we have messed it up in the Church too many times - being very good at pointing out the frailties and the sinfulness of others, while not being able to look inward at what is truly loving and important.

I've done it far too long. I kept saying to myself and saying to others that the Presbyterian Church (USA) can't handle it if we start affirming the LGBTQ community. We will split and divide, and we don't want that right now.

But, I was so wrong, because 25, 30, 40 years later we are still fighting, and now that are finally embracing them [the LGBTQ community], as we should have done years ago, the same churches would have still split. We have to stand with integrity for what we believe and let the God's chips fall where they may.

But I believe, rather than parsing every little sentence about what it might say in the Bible, we look at this passage and if you don't agree with me - I don't want to hear from the women, because if we want to take our Bibles literally - seriously - you women had better keep your mouths shut when you talk to me. You have no right to talk to me as a male and as a clergy, because you have no right according to the Apostle Paul, or anyone, else to speak the Word to men, whether it be in the pulpit, in a Bible class, or anywhere else including your home.

Now we have said that is unacceptable, thank God, because your sexuality as a woman is an outward sign, and God looks beyond male and female.

I think God does that with everything else, and we need to embrace, so that the inward part of every human being is loved and accepted and made whole, by the loving arms of God.
Amen.