

Turquoise - Magic/Art (John 14:15-21)

A few years ago, I publicly announced my identity as a same-gender loving individual. At the time I was serving a congregation both in music ministry and in a more formal congregational ministry capacity. While I commend members of the church leadership for trying to make things work, having an openly queer minister on staff proved to be too much. The church welcomed my gifts of music and creative arts, but made it clear that they did not affirm my queer identity and would not fully recognize my call as a minister. I could stay on as a musician as long as I kept quiet about the whole gay thing, but I would no longer be allowed to preach or serve in ministry.

Words cannot accurately describe how I felt at this time--but the word that I think is most appropriate is frustration. I was so frustrated with God. *Why did this have to happen to me? Why did you call me to ministry if people aren't going to receive me? What is it that you want me to do? I've given years of my life to the Church and all they do is take, take, take--what else do you want from me?!*

I needed inspiration, so I visited the church of a colleague of mine. I sat in the back to avoid the cameras and to try and minimize the number of people who might see me. I didn't want drama. I didn't want people asking questions. I just needed a word. Just before the altar prayer, a minister told a story about a plant she had, one that was given to her by a janitor at the college she attend. This plant was special to her because the janitor was like a father figure who looked out for her, and keeping the plant reminded her of his presence. Many years later she was having her home remodeled and the workers left the plant out in the bitter winter cold. Unfortunately the plant died. She knew she'd have to throw the plant away, but she never got around to it. But when spring came, she noticed the plant was showing faint signs of life. It had started to turn green a bit. So she repotted it, and watered it, and nurtured it. And after some time the plant grew twice as big as it was before. And with that story, she encouraged that, even when people think we are worthless and need to be discarded, God will never throw us away--that God can and will revive us.

Y'all, I sat there and sobbed so uncontrollably, because that's how I felt--dead and discarded. But I felt God in that moment reminding me that I was not alone, I was not dead, and that I would be restored. While sitting on that pew, I felt God's spirit encouraging and empowering me to continue the work God called *me* to do, and to do them in the unique ways God called me to.

This brings me to our focal scripture for this episode: John 14:15-21. This passage reads as such from the Common English Bible:

¹⁵ *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. ¹⁷ This Companion is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world can't receive because it neither sees him nor recognizes him. You know him, because he lives with you and will be with you.*

¹⁸ *"I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you. ¹⁹ Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my*

Father, you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commandments and keeps them loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

From this passage we learn a few things. First, God made us unique. LGBTQ people are exceptional, in that our identities considered atypical. Some think we are strange, other-worldly, or anomalous. The unfortunate reality is that people often reject what they do not know. This is not new. Many rejected Jesus because his ministry was unfamiliar. Many rejected the early followers of Christ because their message and methods were strange. Many of us have been rejected by family, friends, and faith communities because people don't know what to do with our queerness. Here's the things: other folks may not know your story, but you know. You KNOW. You know who you are. You know who God called you to be. My siblings, trust what you know. Know that you are God's masterpiece.

Also, understand that God will not leave you. Despite the rejection you may experience, God will not leave you helpless or comfortless. Rather than succumbing to the views of naysayers, heed the voice of God and remain steadfast in the vision God gave to you. Others may not recognize the spirit of God that is within you, but you recognize it. And I encourage you to water it and nurture it and watch the tremendous growth. Rest assured that, just as the Divine Parent was with and in Jesus the Christ, so is Christ also in each of us. Celebrate the uniqueness of you. Because you are the image of God, celebrating yourself is a way of giving worship and praise to God. Never forsake God, because God has not forsaken you.

Know that God will always love you. As Christians, we are supposed to be ambassadors for God's kin(g)dom. But unfortunately, some of us have mistaken the honor of being part of God's family as license to determine who can and can't be part of the family. Inclusion or exclusion from the family of Christ is not up to us; it is God's prerogative, and God's alone. God has made it abundantly clear that all who desire are welcomed into this family. So, regardless of what anyone says, and despite how we may feel sometimes, God loves you--always has, and always will.

Finally, God desires for the family to flourish. I think we often miss the point of God sending the holy spirit. Sure, later in the book of Acts, the holy spirit descends upon the disciples and they each began to speak in tongues. Yes, the holy spirit comforts and empowers individuals. Yes, the holy spirit makes one feel good (so to speak). Yes the holy spirit has all of these benefits to the individual--but the primary purpose of the holy spirit was communal. God sent the holy spirit to comfort and empower believers to continue the work of the kin(g)dom. The disciples did not speak in tongues for their own sake, but for the sake of those who needed to hear the good news in a language they could understand. Those filled with the holy spirit are comforted so that they can comfort others.

The holy spirit is mystical and allows us to do some pretty amazing things. It grounds us as spiritual beings connected to God, who is the supreme spiritual being. I know it's a stereotype that artistic people are gay--for instance, the trope of gay choir director. But I think there's something to be said about queer folks' unique ability to reach into the realm of creativity. I

believe our identities as individuals who transcend binaries and human-made social institutions connects us to God in remarkable ways. Our identities are a testament to the Holy Spirit living in us. And people won't always understand our spirituality. That's ok. The scriptures tell us to expect this. We must never abandon the sacredness of our spirituality. We mustn't be ashamed of our mysticalness. Rather, we must remember that God made us unique and special and has equipped us to contribute to God's kin(g)dom in really special ways. Our experiences are valid. Our perspectives are valued. And our dreams are viable. We are full-fledged members of God's strange spiritual family.

I think back to that moment where I was weeping uncontrollably at the back of my friend's church, and I remembered that I was not disposable--that no part of me was disposable. I realized that it is impossible to separate my creative gifts from my queer identity because the two are spiritually intertwined--and I made a commitment that I would no longer reject any part of my identity to make the fruits of my creative ministry appear more digestible. I am a total package. I am God's mystical masterpiece.

Please pray with me:

Loving God, help us to always feel your presence. And when we can't feel you, help us to trust that your spirit is always with us and that we are always connected to you. Empower us to combat forces of evil that say we are unworthy and disposable. Strengthen us to resist powers and principalities masquerading as Christian concern, those that tell us we are not part of your family. The devil is a liar. We are made in your image and nothing can separate us from your love. God, encourage us to embrace our mystical nature, to allow your spirit to flow through us, and to continue to paint the world with our beautiful, queer selves. Just as you have created us perfectly as we are, help us to create a more just and perfect world. In your name we pray--amen.