

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS QUEER

A Palestinian poet, a Muslim, named Naomi Shihab Nye, wrote a wonderful story I read recently.

“Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed for four hours, I heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.”

“Well – one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

“An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the flight service person. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”

“I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly [in Arabic]: The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “No, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just later -- who is picking you up? Let’s call him.”

“We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother til we got on the plane and would ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours.

“She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman

from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

“And then the airline broke out free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

“And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate – once the crying and confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.”

And then she concludes: “This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”

Today we celebrate Pride Sunday, a celebration of who we are as God’s creatures: male and female, gay and straight, black and white and brown and yellow and red. The rainbow flag. The shared community. The beloved community.

In this glorious mixed up world we live in, no one has it all. Each of us has been born with our own set of idiosyncrasies, our particular individualistic oddities or ideas or habits. Isn’t it wonderful that we are all so different! And still have the capacity to love one another?

When the word ‘queer’ was first used to describe people of a different sexual orientation, it was a derogatory word to put down people who weren’t heterosexual. I think it’s beautiful that the LGBTQ+ community has embraced a word that was once meant as an insult. Yes, we are queer. All of us. And proud of it.

The title of this sermon is: “The Kingdom of God is Queer.” Somehow in the production of the bulletin it got mis-typed as “The Kingdom of God was Queer.” No, the Kingdom of God is queer, today, and so shall it be for evermore – because the Kingdom of God is you and me, and we’re all queer, all of us. We’re all in this strange and wonderful journey called life, together.

I stole that title from a Unitarian-Universalist minister, and I love it, because it's an attention-grabber. "The Kingdom of God is Queer." We're each different, we're each unique, strange, funny, weird, and we're each special in the eyes of God our creator, who made us the way we are. And loves us the way we are.

A lot of us here this morning are heterosexual and are probably wondering what a queer kingdom of God has to do with us. "I'm straight, not queer," you may say. But in Jesus' parables and sayings, Jesus proclaims a world turned upside down, a world not of the former Jewish purity code or Roman imperialism, but a new world of radical hospitality and forgiveness, in which the categories of the day that separate us and demean us are rejected. St. Paul tells us, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

If we want to live like Jesus, we have to proclaim loud and clear that "Hey, all you people, all are welcome here at God's table -- all are welcome." Furthermore, our work is not just to sit there at the table but to set the table and welcome others to it.

The beloved community. That's what Jesus is talking about. And Jesus puts his words of inclusion into action by eating with or associating with everyone he meets – regardless of gender, class, race, and presumably even sexuality.

One of the more astounding things Jesus says is that the Kingdom of God is here -- among us -- now – in you, in me, in all of us, worthy or unworthy, saint or sinner. God's love knows no limits, like the air we breathe. The quote from Episcopal priest Carter Heyward reminds us that "the spirit of the law draws us repeatedly to the one and only commandment Jesus himself accepted as essential for life together on the earth: 'You shall love God and your neighbor as yourself.'"

Blessed is everyone who loves God and neighbor, period. Blessed are the poor, Jesus says. Blessed are the hungry and the thirsty, the meek and the merciful, the peacemakers and the persecuted, those who are reviled and spoken evil against falsely. Doesn't matter if you're a Samaritan or a lawyer or a woman. Doesn't matter if you're a Roman centurion or a Jewish tax collector. You are blessed, and part of the beloved community.

It hasn't always been easy. When someone 'came out', how many families have gone through the agony Jesus describes in today's Gospel reading—

For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

The Kingdom of God is queer. The beloved community is bent. But rejoice, dear friends, because this queer Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of love. God can write straight (no pun intended) with our crooked lines. So come, all who are heavily laden with life's ambiguities and imperfections, come all of us, to God's table, and find welcome here.

A marvelous image of the beloved community is found in the children's book, "And Tango Makes Three," based on a true story.

The book opens with a bucolic scene of Central Park and its Zoo as an idyllic place for children and families, including the zoo animals and their families. The Central Park Zookeeper observed that they had a pair of male penguins, Roy and Silo, who liked to do everything together, winding their necks together and ignoring the female penguins. The zookeeper didn't send them away for therapy or decide they were evil for being perverts, he figured they must be in love. Roy and Silo built a nest together like the other mating penguins, but of course couldn't lay an egg. So one day, the Zookeeper brought the pair an extra egg that needed to be cared for, produced by another penguin couple. Roy and Silo took turns sitting on it to keep it warm—until it hatched. The Zookeeper named the chick Tango—because it takes two to make a Tango. Roy and Silo doted on her, and Tango became the first penguin chick at the zoo to have two daddies.

Despite the happy ending to the tuxedo-clad creatures' tale, Tango challenged some Americans' ideas and assumptions about homosexuality, age-appropriateness of the material, and raised the thorny question about what makes a family. So in many places, in this country and abroad, the book was banned.

But we can do better. Can't we! Every act of kindness, every act of inclusiveness, has the power to transform the world. Even if only for a moment. Every shade of the

rainbow remains sharp in the tapestry of the beloved community, the Kingdom of God. If you are aching for that welcome table, if you want to live on the side of love, if you're here to help build the beloved community, then let's just do it. This can still happen, anywhere. Let's take pride in the love God has shown us, all of us, in God's beloved and queer kingdom.