

*The Rush of a Violent Wind: A Reflection on Acts 2:1-21*

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” What does this mean? “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” What a confusing, overwhelming, and joyous event— a proclamation of changed holy awareness. This is the story of my life, and could be the story of your life, too.

Now, I am not clergy... not yet at least. I am a musician, an organist, a graduate student, a pipe organ maintenance technician, part Chicagoan, part Oklahoman, and part Clevelander, I am a self-proclaimed foodie, rogue Presbyterian, and amateur weightlifter. I am... Sol. And my... does that feel good to say. You see, Sol was not my birth name. When I was born, I was given the name Solena. It wasn't until July of 2020 that I came out as a transmasculine person. When I came out, I was living in central Oklahoma, a place I love dearly, but where my true gender is not permitted on legal documents.

I had seen pictures and videos of pride parades, posts on social media, and knew friends in the “L, G, and B,” part of the community, but never understood the “T, or the Transgender community.” I always viewed what would become the trans community, my chosen family—as an “other,” something I didn't understand, and certainly something I didn't see as a holy and sacred journey that would become one of the main pillars of my faith and identity as a Christian.

What I love about this passage from Acts is the fact that with as much chaos as is evident— this is truly a passage about listening. “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,” a multitude of different languages being spoken and Peter shouting “Stop. Think. Listen. No, this is what was spoken.” We celebrate the ability to hear the various languages and experiences of others.

One of my favorite gifts as an organist is the ability to explore different faith traditions in many different contexts. I was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition and never explored other denominations until I began playing the organ at the age of nineteen. What were these new services? What were the nuances between each denomination? Who were the clergy? I had never really bothered to explore why I believed what I believed until my faith (or lack thereof), came to a screeching halt. Like the rush of a violent wind.

Being so steeped into my professional career, I neglected to develop personal relationships and God forbid, explore, and develop who I was as a person. I suspect I even used my work to keep from discovering who I was. And yet, something began to gnaw at me. I remember winning a scholarship at my alma mater, the University of Oklahoma, for a women's association. I turned to a friend and said “why did I win this? Like I don't feel like I should win this...” She replied “umm... I mean, you're a woman.” To which I replied “yeah... but not like a ‘real woman’ you know...you know what I mean? Don't you just feel like you're sort of faking it?” and she stared at me with a look of confusion that rivaled my face in my first semester undergraduate calculus course, in which I proudly earned the grade of a C minus.

I returned to my job as a substitute organist the following Sunday, there, week after week, themes of worship encompassed the greatest hits of doom and week after week, I filled out my

bingo card of which marginalized group was destined to go to hell that week. And then, one Sunday, the pastor talked about transgender people. As I listened to his hurtful words, a sudden thought, a totally different thought, like the rush of a violent wind, came into my head. It ignored the pastor's condemning words and extended a metaphorical hand saying "you are my son. It's ok. I love you." To which I swatted that hand away. No. This couldn't be. Please God, this couldn't be. I knew how trans people were treated in this world. I didn't want to sign up for this. No rush of a violent wind for me.

Soon after, I sheepishly and ashamedly bought my first suit jacket and tie. I loved how it looked but didn't want to be stared at in public. I would go to my church job and change into a flowery blouse in the organ loft before greeting the congregation, and then I heard those words again for the second time, "you are my son. It's ok. I love you." To which I swatted that hand away. No. This couldn't be. Please God, this couldn't be.

Then the third time. The number three we see so many times in scripture. I am cutting off 14 inches of my wavy hair, I go again to my church job to hear about LGBTQIA+ people going to hell, and again "you are my son. It's ok. I love you." My God. Why me? I don't know what to do. No rush of a violent wind for me, thanks.

It was a few more months of pondering before I eventually told my church leaders that I may be transgender. And you could probably guess their reaction. I was told "you don't exist in the eyes of the church," I was fired from what I thought was my dream job as a director of music, was rejected by people I thought were my closest friends and was no longer allowed to practice in the faith tradition that I was raised in. It was a story I had heard so many times. But now, it was a reality, it was my reality. Underneath my façade of what my friends might describe as extroversion, a loud, boisterous sense of humor, affinity for social events, smiles, and laughter, was a deep pain. In the process of self-discovery, heard words of hatred, violence, rejection, and an uncertain future, it wasn't until the day that I was convinced my life was truly going to end that I got a phone call from a friend, an episcopal priest in Oklahoma saying "Sol, I'm coming to pick you up. You're coming to our house. It's going to be ok. You are loved."

We as queer people have had the bible weaponized at us, with an expressed need to be saved, we've even had Acts 2:21! Remember the last line of the passage we just heard? "But everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Saved from what? from whom? It's not being saved from something, but the assistance to become something. As Rev. Throckmorton described in one of several of our amazing conversations leading up to this day, being "saved" not running away from a seeming hellfire, it's the same Greek word meaning "to make whole." Being "saved" is simply about wholeness. Christianity and queerness are not meant to cancel out each other but are one in the same. I, too was being "saved— and in the process of becoming whole." God did not put us on the roster for hatred and ostracization because we need to be something else... We, queer and trans people, are part of the creation story, in whatever context you may believe it, as ourselves.

I view my trans journey as a calling. I have been created by God and called to be who I am. And when were callings ever easy? Think of Moses. Think of the disciples. Not even one said "yes, Lord, I'm ready to serve you, it sounds like a piece of cake with absolutely no barriers!" No. Is

the trans journey easy? No. But the God I know does not condemn authenticity, God does not condemn love, God does not send you to the fires of the harshness of life because you did something wrong. This is just as true in your life as it is in mine. No. God is with you as a loving parent in those overwhelming moments and trials. God extends a hand and says “you are my child. It’s ok. I love you.”

You take God’s hand, you may grieve losing the life you envisioned for yourself through social constructs, you cry, you feel anger, all healthy human emotions, and you continue to live with as much authenticity as you can muster, making it a vow to turn back around during your healing and help others who may be at the start of their journey. To live a life of helping and service is to live a holy life, and this is what I believe comes out of the queer, sacred, journey. To live without barriers, to love who you love, to be who you are, to build your family in whatever shape it may look like, in every step of the way, whether out and proud or closeted or questioning is to live a holy, wonderful, and God-given life.

To all my trans siblings, from here, I want to extend my hand to you and say, you are all so loved. If I had the opportunity to learn about diverse genders as a child growing up in school, I might have been spared not all, but at least some of the pain of isolation. To my siblings, we have a job to do. When we are who we are, we are mentors, teachers, and leaders for the next generation, and with the help of our allies, we can aspire and work for a world where all can live freely and without barriers and help the younger ones (both in age and in journey) know they are not alone in this call.

I truly didn’t get to explore my faith until I lost my job and was kicked out of my church. I grew up in an environment where I was taught how to believe and thought faith was about knowing every “correct answer.” It wasn’t until I got into a loving and supportive church environment that I realized my faith is not about having the answers but being able to ask questions and accept that I didn’t have all the answers. A line so commonly heard, and it needs to be is “love your neighbor as yourself,” but just as Peter gave one big reality check to the people of Judea, how, in reality could I love my neighbor the best, most imperfect way I could without the “as yourself” part? God was not calling me to be the woman I never was. God was calling me to be the man I always was, the man I deeply am. And knowing this would be an incredibly difficult journey, God gave me, as Rev. Throckmorton so beautifully spoke about two weeks ago, a fully invested, difficult, but wonderful sense of peace. When we find true, deep love for ourselves, then we can understand what it’s like to love our neighbors. Transitioning, in its challenging, beautiful, and sacred journey and call, has put me one step closer to learning true self-love.

With the challenges of a call also comes great and unique joy. The transgender journey is a difficult journey, but a beautiful journey. A journey of self-acceptance, a deeper understanding of personhood, and a connection to so many other siblings. My journey eventually led me to the Presbyterian Church USA, where I was officially confirmed by reaffirmation of faith on April 11th, 2021. Standing at one side was a deacon, a church leader, a woman of the deepest faith I have ever known. A transgender woman. She would inspire me to keep going. Standing at my other side was an organist. A father figure to me, a mentor, a gay man. He would inspire me to keep going. In my darkest moments, when I didn’t see a future for myself, when I didn’t think, I

would live to see another day, they showed me what queer joy, faith, success, and happiness looked like.

On this day of Pentecost, what can we do as Christians? Well, I relay what Peter had said. To listen. Hatred stems from fear. And fear comes from the unknown. If you have the health and capacity to do so, take time to learn as I have tried to do so, myself. Find an acquaintance that has a very different life than you. Take them to outdoor coffee and listen to their story. Find resources. Ask questions. Tread into formally unknown territory. Embrace positive change. This is how we can combat the hatred and fear that we face. I also hear and admittedly believe, so frequently, why me? I am just one small person in this big world. If you don't believe that one person can change the world, I would invite you to talk to a teacher, someone that changes lives daily. Even listening to and impacting one person's life, as a teacher does, is holy and sacred work.

I am in a good place now. I am the organ scholar for a wonderful church that is loving, welcoming, and kind. I have an incredible network of chosen families that have shown me more love than I could have ever imagined possible. For me, a few people positively changed the trajectory of my life. I have made it my mission, though through my many and countless faults, to try and do the same. I would invite you all to, as well. Having lived in Oklahoma, I know a thing or two about violent winds, but it's after these violent winds that people of all different backgrounds gather together to build each other up for new beginnings. The rush of a violent wind, it is saving us and making us whole.