

My Confession: Guilt, Grace, Gratitude

Ann Carda

Ann Carda grew up in [Chandler Reformed Church](#), Chandler MN, and is a 2000 graduate of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI. She and her family now worship at [St. David's Episcopal Church](#), Minnetonka, MN, where Ann volunteers as a youth minister with high school students. A serendipitous string of events led her to share her story. She reports:

I was watching the live-stream video of General Synod 2014 and noticed that some delegates were wearing rainbow lanyards. I smiled because I knew there must be an organized movement for LGBTQ inclusiveness in the RCA. I found Room for All, fell in love with your mission, and was called to donate. My hope is that my support and this story can be my way of beginning to make restitution for the damage I may have caused during so many years when I was not affirming of all God's children.

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”
(Baptismal Covenant from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, pg. 305)

“I will, with God's help.”

I've made this promise before God and my church at countless baptisms and confirmations. For me, these words serve as an invitation to embrace God's vision for human thriving, but they also remind me of the damage I've done because I failed for so long to understand what it means to fully live into that promise.

I grew up in a small town in southwestern Minnesota. I was blessed with two loving and nurturing parents who were active in our RCA church and gave me the beautiful gift of a Reformed faith I still hold today. I inherited much that I never questioned, including traditional views on sexuality. Regarding homosexuality, I was taught to “love the sinner but hate the sin.”

Looking back, I realize discussions were dominated by the “sin” part; I don't remember much conversation about “loving.” At the time, it didn't matter all that much because I didn't know anyone who was gay (at least I didn't think I did). But recently homosexuality stopped being an “issue” and became personal.

This past February, someone I consider as close as family called me to tell me that he is gay. Matthew is smart, athletic, and he's beautiful inside and out. When he smiles his eyes are so joyous that he lights up the room. He is loved and admired by his friends and family. He's everything a parent could want in a son. He is so much the person that I wanted my own child to be that I sat his parents down and flat out asked them what I needed to do as a parent to ensure my child grows up to be as joyful, and faithful, and all around as wonderful as Matthew and his siblings are.

I would love to tell you more about Matthew but I worry I've already said too much. Matthew isn't even his real name.¹ The fact that I can't use his name speaks better to the problem than I can. Matthew

¹ I chose the name Matthew because as a tax-collector, Matthew was regarded by the religious establishment of the day as someone outside the bounds of grace. But Jesus called him, regardless, and when he chose to follow, Matthew became one of the Twelve.

hides his sexual orientation from his RCA church and most of his family because he doesn't feel safe to be honest about who God created him to be. But isn't the church supposed to be the one place we *can* be completely honest about ourselves?

I say this fully recognizing that for most of my life, I was part of the culture that caused Matthew to live in fear and question whether he can belong. I was not a safe person for him to confide in. I failed to live up to my baptismal promises and, unknowingly, I hurt him. I believe in reconciliation and I believe in redemption and I know that Matthew forgives me and so does God, but that doesn't mean I get to forget. Which brings me to this question: How did we, in the RCA, end up here? Why is this person who I love crying out to God, "Why did you make me like this?"

I remember a philosophy class I took at Calvin College where we reflected on the reality that most of us inherit our religious beliefs from our parents. We think that we come to them intellectually, through reason and study and an honest weighing of the facts. But it's simply not true. I believe almost exactly what my parents believe. Of course I do; I have a deep need to belong in my family and in my community. And this is good; in this way all of us reflect the image of our Creator, a God of community: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. But it also means it's really hard to honestly challenge and doubt our own inherited beliefs, even when we are confronted with evidence that our beliefs might be wrong.

My husband grew up Roman Catholic, so when we married in 2003 our grand compromise was joining the Episcopal Church. That same year Gene Robinson was ordained as the first openly gay bishop. I told myself that I could be a witness to a church going in the wrong direction. But God has a wonderful sense of humor; the church I wanted to save ended up saving me. God placed two wonderful priests in my life who gained my trust, gently invited me to question what I thought Scripture was saying, and encouraged me to see where the Spirit might be leading. They didn't push or judge. They simply invited me into thoughtful, intellectual, faithful conversation. And for the first time in my life, I wanted to believe that sexual orientation didn't matter to God so it shouldn't matter to the church. I wanted to change my mind, but in my heart I felt trapped. My desire to belong in the Reformed tradition was so strong and I thought if I changed my mind about this, I would lose that part of myself. This was the tradition that raised me, that gave me the gift of faith and my love of God, and that made me who I am. My need to belong was stronger than my desire to embrace the truth that God was revealing to me.

I wish I could say that I am a person who, when confronted with injustice, is brave enough to stand up and fight no matter the cost. I am not that person. I was always going to need more than just an intense study of Scripture and a solid theological argument to change my mind. I needed to hear the argument made from someone I respected and trusted in the Reformed tradition.

Thankfully there are *many* people in the Reformed tradition who are brave and who will stand against injustice when they see it... people like Lewis Smedes. As an ordained minister in the Christian Reformed Church, a graduate of Calvin College, Calvin Seminary and a professor of theology at Fuller Seminary, he became the person who gave me the freedom to admit what I already knew to be true. If he could change his mind and still belong, I knew I could, as well. That day when I heard an interview in which Rev. Smedes talks about changing his mind, I realized I had to let a piece of myself die.²

I'm not going to lie... I was scared. Death is not easy. It's letting go and having faith that resurrection is possible with God. I was worried about abandoning my faith when God was calling me to *have* faith. At

² "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy." Introductions by Nicholas Wolterstorff and Mel White.

the time it seemed as though I was losing something, but in reality, God was preparing my heart to receive a gift.

When I think about that February phone call with Matthew, tears well up in my eyes. I'm so thankful that by grace I was free to welcome his news with excitement and affirmation for who God created him to be. I had already changed my mind, but with Matthew's words, "I'm gay," God pulled me out of death into this beautiful life of resurrection; it was as if scales fell from my eyes. All along, God had wanted to give me this amazing gift of new eyes to see a gospel that is wider and deeper and richer than I ever could have imagined, a gospel that is good news for all God's children.

I was finally at peace, but at the same time with those new eyes I saw the damage I was responsible for. As Matthew talked, I heard the fear in his voice. He feared what his church would do if they found out, and not just to him, but what the church would put his family through. He feared that no matter what his relationship had been with someone before, if he came out, he would face being defined solely by his sexual orientation. He would be judged and people would talk about him behind his back because they would no longer see him as a person; they would see him as a problem. Matthew has to choose between belonging and being himself.

So why am I writing this? I don't expect that anything I say is going to change anyone's mind. But what I can do is "come out" as one who supports full inclusion of all those whom God calls to God's church, no matter their sexual orientation. And I can hope that my "coming out" may help others find the courage to openly question their inherited beliefs as well, to step out in faith when the Spirit calls us to let something die, and to trust that God will raise up something new.

Most importantly, I want to do whatever I can so that all the "Matthews" in our lives who are vulnerable and hiding and hoping that their church will love them unconditionally will be able to come out with a little less fear of what they face on the other side of that door. The culture in the RCA needs to change, and change happens one person at a time.

I'm hopeful that one day Matthew will see his sexual orientation as a gift and not a burden. I'm hopeful that one day the RCA will see this too. With pride we say that we are "Reformed and always reforming." What better time to embrace that identity, to question the structure that we inherited, and to look with hope at where the Spirit is leading the church?

Like many of you, when I think of belonging in the Reformed tradition the words that come to mind are from our Heidelberg Catechism. The very first question and answer:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own but belong-body and soul, in life and in death- to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Those words hang in my kitchen because I LOVE being reminded of where I belong. And now I dream of a day when Matthew can hear those words without having to wonder whether his church believes they are meant for him too.

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