

Where is the Church?

A reflection offered by Room for All Executive Director Marilyn Paarlberg
on the occasion of her retirement. Fall, 2019

June 27th, 2010: a hot Manhattan afternoon. The temperature, stifling; the climate, *fabulous!* Clear blue skies, with rainbows as far as the eye could see. New York City's Pride March was in full swing: peacocks and pole dancers, drag queens and dignitaries, brass bands and belly dancers, all *exuberating* down 5th Avenue.

Maybe that's why *he* stood out.

All the other floats, blaring amplified music, were festooned with every kind of dazzle imaginable. *He* sat in a metal folding chair on the back of a long, bare, flatbed truck. No flowers, no party-store streamers, not even a plastic floor plant.

Just a muscular black man in a blue sequined dress.

Oh, but *what* a dress: chic, shoulderless, shimmering! The sun caught the rippling sequins as he turned from side to side to wave—silently—at the crowd. Perspiration streamed down his somber face.

The parade slowed to let pedestrians cross the teeming street, and the truck came to a momentary stop in front of a large stone church. A life-size statue of a smiling, bespectacled old man offered permanent welcome near the door; for this occasion, he sported a rainbow boa around his neck.

Out in front, people in bright "LOVE. PERIOD" T-shirts were filling paper water cups to offer the marchers. One stepped off the curb and lifted up a cup to the man in the blue dress, who leaned over the side of the truck, accepted the water, and drank it down in one gulp. The truck was still idling as the water-bearer went back to the sidewalk table and returned with a two-liter bottle to refill the cup.

What made each decide to do what he did then?

As Blue Dress extended his empty cup, Love Period handed up the whole bottle. Blue Dress hesitated a beat; then, with a broad grin, leaned his head back and poured the water—*all the water*—over his face. He seemed to come to life in that moment, and laughed in rich baritone. Love Period laughed, too. They both waved, and the parade moved on.

* * *

*The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and... proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.*¹

* * *

Where is the church? On that hot June day nine years ago, I caught a glimpse of it that still captivates me. I wish I knew about the person in the blue sequined dress. I introduced him to you just now as a man, because in 2010 I was ignorant of the possibilities. But I’ve learned since then, and wondered. Was he, she? Or they? I wish I knew their name—their story. Was he a drag queen? Was she transgender? Was their noticeable reserve and the bare bones conveyance a sign of coming-out anxiety, or was the whole thing a piece of playful, low-budget performance art?

The ambiguity didn’t seem to matter to the Collegiate Church member who ignored the strict protocol of the water table by giving away an entire bottle to a thirsty queer person on the road. *What was to prevent him?* And what was to prevent the grateful recipient from an

¹ Acts 8: 34-39. All biblical references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

immersion of sorts that left them both rejoicing at the surprising, abundant, free-flowing generosity of it all?

Believe me, I *get* all the good Reformed cautions to what I'm about to say. But to me, in that moment, it looked for all the world like a sacrament, a sign and seal of the unconditional mystery of grace offered through the church. So much so, that in the years since, I haven't been able to hear the biblical story of the Ethiopian eunuch, a queer amalgam of ambiguities,² without picturing them in a blue sequined dress.

I've always wondered what Philip told the other apostles afterwards, and how they reacted. Did they seek to bring charges against him for violating the purity of the church? Did they form a special task force to debate "grace-filled separation" over baptizing people whose sexual or gender identity threatened their anachronistic notion of who belongs? Did some advocate for Ethiopian eunuchs to be patient and wait for the church to figure itself out? Would a group anxious and overzealous church folk decide the future of this fragile communion that Jesus had prayed might all be one?³

Realistically, though—what *might* have prevented that baptism on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza? Well, centuries of codified religious prohibitions against eunuchs and foreigners, for starters. And what was to prevent Peter, a few chapters later, from baptizing a whole household of Gentiles and defending the act before the scandalized apostles? "Can anyone withhold the water? Who was I, that I could hinder God?"⁴

Only a few weeks in from Pentecost, and already, long-held restrictions about purity were transformed, and thereafter transforming that embryonic Jesus movement known as The Way. Where was the church in its early days? It seems to me that it in its best moments, the church was getting out of God's way, and as a result, was *on the way*. So much so, that in a round-robin

² See Sean D. Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.) In the introduction (p.1), Burke notes: "Here is a biblical character who seems to embody multiple differences—of class, race, gender, and possibly of religion and sexuality as well. What has sustained my interest in the Ethiopian eunuch, however, is *ambiguity*. Each time I attempted to define a particular difference he might embody, I discovered ambiguity."

³ John 17: 21

⁴ Acts 10: 47, 11: 17

letter to the church in Ephesus, a flawed and forgiven Paul wrote of ancient dividing walls coming down, and “the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, that *through the church* the wisdom of God in its rich variety might *now* be made known.”⁵

* * *

If you’ve never allowed yourself to interrogate Scripture, this might be a good place to start. Through *the church*, Paul? Seriously? You’re saying that God trusts *us* to make the rich variety of God’s wisdom known in fresh, new ways? Have you read the news lately? Could this possibly include the RCA? Take this, for example: as a result of performing his daughter’s and her girlfriend’s marriage, New Brunswick Seminary president Norm Kansfield lost his job and was put on trial by the RCA General Synod. What was to prevent a loving parent from such a sacred act? The lamentable answer in 2005 was: the Reformed Church in America.

And yet—*and yet!* Within a few dizzying months after Norm’s trial, a determined and hope-filled group of RCA folks had formed a fledgling organization that cast a vision for a better way to be the church: “Compelled by the inclusive love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, Room for All envisions the day when people of all sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions are fully affirmed in the life and ministry of the Reformed Church in America.” What was to prevent Room for All’s founding Board from entering *those* waters? Some had already lost their jobs, or couldn’t get a job, because of their publicly-stated inclusive position or personal identity. But thanks be to God, “hope does not disappoint us”⁶ —Room for All was on the way.

Fast forward five years to find me at my first Pride March, where I witnessed that holy “Blue Dress moment” amid a steady stream of high-spirited, banner-carrying church groups—even RCA church groups!—parading down the streets of New York, not in righteous protest, but joyful solidarity and welcome. As I watched it all, I heard myself say—out loud—to no one in particular, “I want that.” So much so, that before the march was over, I walked past that genial statue and into that stone church for my scheduled job interview with Room for All, knowing

⁵ Ephesians 3: 9-10

⁶ Romans 5:5

with new-found certainty that if they offered me the position, I would say yes. *What was to prevent me?* I sensed an invitation to be a voice for widening the welcome in this old denomination—this communion that had not withheld the waters of baptism from *me*, and had sent me on my way to a life of faith.

* * *

As for the LGBTQ-affirming church I glimpsed that day nearly a decade ago, I still want that. And I believe that you wouldn't be here tonight if you didn't want that, too. And precisely for that reason, because you want an LGBTQ-affirming church, you're part of this story—RfA's story is our story. By God's grace and the generous partnership of the LGBTQ community and their allies in the RCA; by open minds, hearts, and yes—wallets; by creativity, skill and persistence; by learning from mistakes and plenty of forgiveness, we've come a long way together. Ours is a story worth celebrating!

But where is the church? In case you hadn't heard, the RCA isn't there yet. In the years before and after 2005, the General Synod has continued to debate measures that would fence the rich variety of God's wisdom, to the extent that we're on the verge of dividing over our differences. At times it seems that we trust our own certitude more than the mysteries of God.

So what do we do now, together? To be sure, there are uncertainties as we await the results of the RCA's 2020 Vision project. But the good news is that Room for All's vision tests better than 20/20. With God's inclusive love as our lens, we're poised—no, *compelled*—to continue to embody and advocate for the welcome and affirmation of God's LGBTQ beloved in the life and ministry of the RCA, on whatever path the RCA takes.

I believe that the vision of Room for All must be continually reborn and recommitted to, today and every tomorrow, because *it is simply the gospel*. Because no matter what happens after 2020, there will still be queer kids coming of age in RCA churches, who may be drawn to the winsomeness of that gospel; who need to know the church doors are wide open to them; that they belong, body and soul; that their considerable gifts and the integrity of their experience will be welcomed, affirmed, and celebrated. LGBTQ people may continue to seek their place,

not in some Reformed Church in America closet, but at our fonts, our tables, and, if so gifted and called, our pulpits. Affirming parents and pastors will continue to seek resources for how to support LGBTQ people in their families or congregations. LGBTQ students at RCA-affiliated colleges and seminaries will still need advocates. Aspiring straight, cisgender allies will still need to be educated. And yes, now and then, proud RCA ministers will still officiate at same-gender weddings.

If you ask me, Room for All's ministry in the RCA remains a gospel imperative, no matter what.

Well, the 20/20 Vision Group hasn't asked me. But in closing, I would point them, and you, to *this* vision described by the transgender writer Austen Hartke. Discussing the familiar parable of the lost sheep, and Jesus' identity as the shepherd in the story, Hartke writes:

But what if we imagined this story a different way? What if the lost sheep didn't wander away from the safety and goodness of the shepherd? What if it was just trying to escape the cruelty of the flock? Sheep will occasionally pick out a flock member who doesn't fit in... and they'll chase that individual away... Christians have been driving LGBTQ+ people away from the church for decades—and then asking why we won't come back and repent.⁷

Hartke continues:

Take a look at what Jesus does with this situation, though. He leaves the ninety-nine sheep behind to go in search of the one who needs help.... What's at stake for Jesus [here] isn't just the single lost sheep, and it's not just the ninety-nine back home. It's the integrity of the flock as a whole.... Saving just the main group or just the individual wouldn't do any good, because the flock is more than the sum of its parts. When Jesus goes after that lost sheep, what he's telling the flock—what he's telling us—is that we're not complete without each other.... When LGBTQ Christians are accepted and celebrated in Christian communities, the Good Shepherd's flock is put back together... we get a preview of God's

⁷ Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 168.

*kingdom here on earth.... We say yes, individually and communally, to the love of God that seeks to bind us together, and we are transformed.*⁸

Room for All is dedicated to that vision of integrity—transformation—for the church of Jesus Christ. Gay, straight, bi, trans, cisgender, non-binary, brown, black, white, wandering sheep or water-bearers—and yes, queers in blue sequined dresses. Because room for all means room for each. We are incomplete without each other.

Relying on that vision, Room for All dares, with fear and trembling, to claim—and proclaim—the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things: that “*through the church*: this fragile, flawed and forgiven communion; *through the church* we might catch a glimpse of God’s rainbow covenant of love, the free-flowing water of baptism, the ever-expanding Table of Grace; *through the church* the mystery of God’s rich, dazzling and diverse wisdom might *now* be made known.

Now—might *now* be made known. Beloved friends, what is to prevent us—together—from making room for all? Amen, and may it be so.

⁸ Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*, 176. I took liberty with this quote by expanding Hartke’s designation here, which is: “When transgender Christians are accepted and celebrated.....”