

What Started as a Riot...

I was recently given a writing prompt that started “**With my feet on this unknown path, I know I am traveling with...**” What a great prompt! Who are my fellow journeyers? With whom am I in covenantal relationship as we plow this land together? **With my feet on this unknown path, I know I am traveling with** fellow revolutionaries. And by that, I mean other people who believe as I do that it is good and right to upturn and upend and interrupt systems of oppression and injustice. We are a religious movement rooted in reform, reformation, and heresy. As last week’s 10-year-old chalice lighter put it, we are a people of upstanders--and I would add to that list upspeakers, uplifters, and uprisers. The status quo has an incredibly powerful downward force--it keeps things in place even more intensely than just the forces of gravity and inertia alone. There is a system that presses down from above, and for that system to be moved, a strong coalition of upstanders, uprisers, and uplifters are needed.

With my feet on this unknown path, I also know I am traveling with people who are wary of revolutionary and radical language. For many people, safety and security are of utmost importance. That’s understandable, but it raises some serious questions: Safety for whom? Security for whom? In other words, who is your neighbor? Facebook has this feature now that lets people mark themselves as safe if they are

geographically close to some kind of emergency or disaster or shooting. I've been thinking about this feature for quite some time, because it troubles me. I understand that people who know and love me want to know that I am safe, but it feels like such an unseemly declaration to make--especially at the exact moment when my fellow community members are not safe. Whose safety is being prioritized? And why are we skipping so quickly over the names and stories of those who were not safe? Those whose lives **were** affected?

I want to build a new way with your help, church, and it involves hearing more from people who almost never feel safe in our city? Especially people who have intersecting oppressions. For some people, their bird cage is actually pretty escapable--just a few wires causing a minor inconvenience or two. But for others the cage is a tightly-wired web of interlocking oppressions. How do we learn more about supporting people in these overlapping oppressions? With my feet on this unknown path, I know I am traveling with a lot of privilege and access...and I'm traveling with fellow journeyers who land across the full spectrum of access and privilege. I must learn how to hold that complexity.

For the purpose of this morning's sermon, I want to try an exercise of imagination. I'm going to give you a writing prompt... "What Started as a Riot..." Now if this were a writing class, you all would be off to the races with beautiful thoughts and stories rich with images. You would write tales of grief and loss, tales of power and reclamation. You might start referencing Star Wars or Hunger Games or other moral rebellions against tyranny. You might write boldly against rioting and the destruction of

property. You might write elegies about the pain and suffering throughout the world and throughout history that occasionally lead to riots.

You might reference the Christian scriptures when Jesus flipped over the table in the temple because of the usury and excessive capitalism taking place in that holy space. You might write about the 7 plagues of destruction in the Hebrew Scriptures-- plagues brought about by God against a wickedly powerful empire who was subjugating and enslaving a whole people group.

Or maybe like Adrienne Rich, you would've written a poem about the small cairn of stones you intend to build. Stone by stone...one piled on top of the other...in the shape of nothing that has ever existed before. Your mark of resistance that you want to leave across slanting fields as "an assertion that this piece of country matters for large and simple reasons." Maybe some of you--as we've heard in recent chalice lightings-- want to attend to the riot of your heart--where you seek to burn down the buildings of oppression that have stood for too long and to systematically deconstruct/dismantle the structures of white supremacy and racism that lie dormant in all of us. If so, I say kudos. Keep your ears tuned to the language of the unheard. Hear the pain and learn its dialect.

And also stay with me for a ***different*** riot. It was June 28, 1969. Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in NYC. The police had been constantly raiding gay bars and arresting people--especially people who weren't dressed in accordance with the sex listed on their identification cards. This was a regular occurrence at the time. But

something was different this night...Usually the police raids happened much earlier in the evening--not at 1:20 in the morning.

There was electricity in the air this particular night. It was the same week that Judy Garland had died. There had been many protests over the course of the previous years--protests against racism, against poverty, and against the Vietnam War. People had learned more about protest--maybe even been empowered by it. But this night was different...there was no single person or organizing collective that was leading this uprising.

The only organizations that had been formed to celebrate and defend the rights and livelihoods of homosexuals were trying to play by all the rules. They didn't even have the words "gay" or "lesbian" or "homosexual" in their names so as to avoid the appearance of being too radical or edgy. The organizations were relatively quiet and respectable. When they planned protests, the men wore suits and ties, and the women wore skirts and dresses--even if the protestors never dressed that way in their regular life. They didn't hold hands with their lovers at any of their public events or rallies. They tried to appear like sexless, harmless respectable men and women asking politely for the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts. But this particular night was different...

People were sick of respectably responding to being harassed and being polite as they got arrested for wearing the outfits of their choosing and living the lives they wanted. Wikipedia tells me the powerful words of one protestor named Michael Fader: "We all had a collective feeling like we'd had enough of this kind of shit. It wasn't

anything tangible anybody said to anyone else, it was just kind of like everything over the years had come to a head on that one particular night in the one particular place, and it was not an organized demonstration... Everyone in the crowd felt that we were never going to go back. It was like the last straw. It was time to reclaim something that had always been taken from us.... All kinds of people, all different reasons, but mostly it was total outrage, anger, sorrow, everything combined, and everything just kind of ran its course...And we felt that we had freedom at last, or freedom to at least show that we demanded freedom. We weren't going to be walking meekly in the night and letting them shove us around...There was something in the air, freedom a long time overdue, and we're going to fight for it. It took different forms, but the bottom line was, we weren't going to go away. And we didn't."

Some people talk about and reimagine the Stonewall Riots as a protest primarily centered on gay men. There is even a 2015 movie in which the main character--a fictional white man from the Midwest-- threw the first brick. In other versions of the story, the first brick was thrown by one of two trans women of color--Marsha P. Johnson or Silvia Rivera. Neither of them corroborates that story, but they were definitely involved with the riots, and they were very mad and very vocal. Quick sidenote: They actually identified themselves as drag queens, transvestites, or street queens, and when asked what her middle initial stands for Marsha P. Johnson responded, "Pay It No Mind." Sylvia reported that on the second night of the riots, Marsha "Pay It No Mind" Johnson climbed a lamppost and threw down a heavy purse at a police car breaking the windshield.

Some people say it wasn't a brick...it was a shot glass thrown inside the bar at a police officer, and they say it was the shot glass heard round the world. There were also reports of drag queens performing a Rockettes-style kick line, but many eyewitnesses say that is wrong. There wasn't a single kick line--there were many kick lines.

Another version of the story grabbed my attention a while back (and again this week). Her name was Storme DeLarverie. She was a butch biracial lesbian, and she has quite the story. She had a smooth baritone voice, and she dressed like a dapper gentleman, often wearing a slim men's suit. She was a singer and an entertainer, working as the main emcee for the Jewel Box Revue--a show with 25 drag queens. She saw herself as the mother hen, and she was very protective of her "boys" as she called them. She was inside the Stonewall Inn that night, and there were multiple eyewitness reports of her being walked out of the bar in handcuffs and toward a police vehicle multiple times, because she kept breaking away and fighting back and resisting arrest. At one point, she turned to the spectating crowd and yelled, "Why are you just standing there? Do something!" Many people claim that this moment was one of the main catalysts that stoked the fires of rebellion that night. And until recently, most people didn't even know her name.

And what is my point here? Why am I telling you all these different versions of the story? Which one is true? And I have an answer for you...Does it matter? Maybe all of them have elements of truth...maybe all of them have embellishments. Real life isn't a movie. There's not just one main character and there's not just one plotline

happening at one time--especially not in a leaderless movement. Someone may have thrown a shot glass while someone else was throwing a brick. Still others upended and threw garbage bins while someone else used a dislodged parking meter to break a window.

The Stonewall Riots were a major moment in the movement for gay liberation, but there are still multiple lenses through which to view these events. Our need for a singular point of origin or an incontrovertible origin story is strong yet problematic and misguided. We must avoid the danger of a single story. For many people, this moment was the beginning of their activism; for many people, this moment was the culmination of decades of work. And for still others, this moment didn't even register on their radar...and neither did the AIDS epidemic or the harm caused by Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

For someone like Aimee Stephens, Stonewall may have given her the strength to fight for her rights to fair employment. When she came out as transgender, her employer fired her, and she fought back. Her case made it all the way to the Supreme Court, and just last week one month after her death--that bold act of resistance bloomed into a full-petalled flower of protection against any discrimination that is based on sexual orientation or gender identity. And on the same exact weekend, our President's Administration made it harder for trans Americans to serve in the military. Some people might fairly say "What started as a riot...went largely overlooked and untalked about... Politicians ignored me and my cause, and many of them are still actively fighting against me and my survival. And I will continue to rise up against that injustice."

On the night of June 28, 1969--51 years ago this exact day--a gay rights movement was already underway. But this particular moment--which lasted a few nights--was a catalyst that lit the fire to help coalesce that moment into a broader movement. This was a historical coming together of forces. The Sixties were a time of Revolution and Upheaval. People got more vocal about their resistance. In certain circles there was more societal pressure to resist oppression and discrimination, and to do so loud and proud. Nina Simone sang "To Be Young Gifted and Black." James Brown sang "Say it Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud." Many of the early gay liberation tactics and slogans came from the Civil Rights movement.

There were many forces at work in the Sixties...just like now...and just like in 1918 with its flu pandemic and the Great World War. There's always a lot going on if you're awake to it. But sometimes we're distracted. In his confessional poem, Ilya Kaminsky reminds us that sometimes we're in the middle of a war, and people's homes are literally being bombed. We protest for a time but not for long enough. Sometimes people's houses are falling down invisibly--one after the other, and we might just take a chair outside and watch the sun. He concludes by tying our willingness to be distracted to our economic benefit:

In the sixth month
of a disastrous reign in the house of money
in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,
our great country of money, we (forgive us)

lived happily during the war."

I understand the allure of the saying “Ignorance is Bliss.” It has power, but it also has a real and present danger. Are you aware of the wars being waged against trans folx, against the poor, against people of color?

Sometimes our distractions may even feel like progress, as Jericho Brown reminds us. We were too busy celebrating Diana Ross and how much we loved her to notice the burning cities. He imagines her thoughts:

Got another #1 and somebody

Set Detroit on fire. That was power--
White folks looking at me

Directly and going blind

So they wouldn't have to see
What in the world was burning black.

How many times have we heard the same song and dance about how much progress America proved by electing Obama? But we all know the underside to that story. Confession is the heartbeat of anti-oppression work. Let's admit that we have a distraction problem. Let's admit that it's easier to ignore the pain and anger that is happening all around us, but let's be sure not to stop at mere confession. Let's allow our confession to move us toward repair.

I have a confession to make. If I hadn't myself been gay, I might not have been fighting for gay liberation when I did. And if I'm being completely honest here, I didn't magically just understand the need to advocate for the other beautiful members of the

queer community. At the time, I was just working for my own survival. I didn't need society to accept trans people or people who were non-binary. I just needed them to accept me. And I felt the intense pressure to conform and be a respectable gay man that looked just like other men of power and privilege except for one tiny little detail. But part of me wanted to keep that little detail a secret. They never really had to see it because I'd be in my own house and out of the limelight, and why don't I just go back in the closet? Would I be okay then? No, a thousand times no! This is the exact reason that we have PRIDE. It is the antidote to shame. There is nothing shameful about queer identities. Full stop.

So here's a question for you. When was the first moment you woke up to the mistreatment of LGBTQ folx? What was your first act of repair? And when did you take it? Not many of us can take the instant leap from deep sleep all the way to fully engaged in deep social justice work. So don't worry if it took you some time. You're not alone...it's a process. In just a moment, we will hold silence for a short while. And here are your questions to ponder: What has been your process of LGBTQ awakening? And in what way will you follow a similar trajectory with other oppressions?

How can we imagine building a new way? How are we going to mark this moment and others like it? These moments where we are integrating our learning, where we are committing to a re-imagination of the way we want our society to be. I offer a moment of reflection and meditation. Imagine with me that you're standing on a land that you

love, full of intention, with hands ready to do the work. And let us hear again the words

of Adrienne Rich:

Stone by stone I pile
this cairn of my intention
with the noon's weight on my back,
exposed and vulnerable
across the slanting fields
which I love but cannot save
from floods that are to come;
can only fasten down
with this work of my hands,
these painfully assembled
stones, in the shape of nothing
that has ever existed before.
A pile of stones: an assertion
that this piece of country matters
for large and simple reasons.
A mark of resistance, a sign.

May we be filled with a powerful resistance and may we resist resignation. May we be pointed toward pride and acceptance and away from shame and guilt. May we be pointed toward continued awakening and repair and away from fragility and stagnancy. May we know that self-love and self-compassion lead to love and compassion for others. Blessed be and amen.