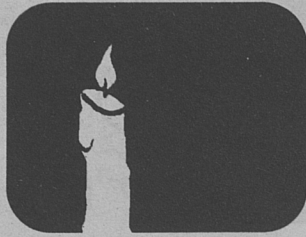


health & wellbeing

FAITH MATTERS

by the reverend christine leslie



Faith Matters and Hate Matters

A year ago, Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old openly gay student at the University of Wyoming, was savagely beaten and left hanging on a wooden fence to die. Six days later, he died from the wounds he received at the hands of two young men who claimed Matt had come on to them. Several weeks before Matthew's death, James Byrd, an African American Texan, was chained to a truck and dragged to his death because he was a person of color. When Billy Jack Gaither, another gay man was murdered shortly after Matthew died, the fall of 1998 became forever emblazoned in my memory.

The school shootings this year and the ethnic cleansing in Serbia make it an understatement to say that hate matters. Something about the way we live is telling mad, bitter people filled with unresolved hurt and anger they are entitled to project their feelings on to a stigmatized group and kill members of these. All of these deadly expressions of hate fill with me a fear that would have me run and hide. They also motivate me to do everything I can to help stop the hate and end the silence that leads to violence. This fall has provided me with ample opportunity to do the latter rather than the former.

I helped to create a workshop for the University of Vermont called "Did You Come Here To Hate?" This is an anti-bias workshop that explores the Biblical origins of sexism, racism, and homophobia. It is designed to help participants understand one of the sources in our culture that says it's OK to stigmatize a group of people and then treat them cruelly with no remorse. The need for the workshop is evident in the amount of homophobic, racist, and sexist graffiti that's showing up in the residence halls at UVM.

I am sad to say the most prevalent kind of graffiti appearing in the residence halls is anti-gay. This underscores what the Southern Poverty Law Center has uncovered in its study of FBI statistics: "In our country gay and lesbian people are 6 times as likely to be physically attacked as Hispanics or Jews and 2 times as likely as African

Americans. But the pattern has never fixed itself in the public mind the way racial assaults have." It's painful to wonder how many more GLBT people will be bludgeoned to death before this is well known.

This graffiti is shocking and sickening to read. In the workshop we use what is being written in the dorm hallways and bathrooms and we talk about how the graffiti makes us feel. Then we read the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that have been cited for centuries by people wanting biblical backing for their bigotry and hate. Most participants are shocked by what they hear and are unaware to what degree these scriptures have been misused to legitimize violence towards women, Jews, people of color, and GLBT people.

During the workshop it becomes apparent to most participants that taking the Bible literally is virtually impossible. It's surprising to learn that so

many people have been taught to believe that GLBT people are evil incarnate, and are to be feared, mocked, demeaned, silenced, and murdered in the name of so-called biblically based religious beliefs. It also begs the question, "If the Judeo-Christian scriptures have been used to hurt so many people for so long, then what good are they anyway?"

This is where faith matters come into the picture, along with the importance of learning how to read and study these writings contextually. Having these conversations can make a difference between ending the silence that leads to violence and not. Having these conversations can mean the difference between stopping the hate and not.

Stopping the hate begins with ending the silence we often keep about what we really believe to be true about God and what we really believe to be valuable about the Judeo-Christian heritage and its scriptures. It takes a great deal of faith in the God of goodness and love and not the God of judgment and damnation to do this. Because it means that we open ourselves to being targeted and possibly hurt by people who will hate us for challenging long held understandings of the scriptures, it's a risk that many are not willing to take.

I've come to realize that remaining silent is a far more

deadly risk to take than anything another person might do to me. Because the violence of silence eats away at our souls like a malignancy that eventually kills us spiritually, remaining silent is not an option for me. I would rather die from having had the courage to speak up than live with the violence of silence. Were Matt Shepard able to talk to us, I believe he would tell us that he

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wouldn't have lived his life any differently, even though his life was cut short at the hands of hate. I pray every day for the courage to be as faithful to myself as Matt was to himself. Perhaps if we were all to do this as faithfully as Matt did, then there might come a day when hate won't matter at all. ▼

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