

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I got roped into being the church acolyte a *lot* as a child, we're talking like three times a month for most of middle school. We did the "everyone come forward and kneel/stand around the altar rails and the pastor walks around passing bread out, and a communion assistant trails behind with the wine and juice" style of distribution. One of the acolyte's jobs was to follow right next to the pastor and be ready. Because every time he got to a child who hadn't had their first communion yet, he would, no warning, thrust the plate of bread in my general direction, and I had to grab it quickly because he'd just drop it, so I always was paying real close attention to this part. And what happened next would be *exactly* identical every time. He'd kneel in front of the child, grin and look them in the eyes and trace the sign of the cross on their forehead as he called them by name and then said **"At your baptism, we marked you with the sign of the cross and that makes you a child of God forever, and *no one* can take that from you. I love you and I'm so glad you're in church today."** His facial expression, pacing, cadence, volume, tone, pause, every single part would be exactly the same every single time. The only part that differed was the child's name, and even that he'd keep as identical as possible every single week. And when there were two or three or five children all lined up in a row, each child would get the same message individually one after another.

"*Oldest*, at your baptism, we marked you with the sign of the cross and that makes you a child of God forever, and *no one* can take that from you. I love you and I'm so glad you're in church today." **"*Youngest*, at your baptism, we marked you with the sign of the cross and that makes you a child of God forever, and *no one* can take that from you. I love you and I'm so glad you're in church today."** **"*Middlest*, at your baptism...**

And I don't know if you know this about me but... I have a really smart mouth. I asked him once why he did this. I mean it was the *exact* same every week, maybe he could speed it up a bit? Do a shorter one sometimes? Or he could do siblings together in bulk? Like it was interesting at first but...we get it. And he grinned at me and said something like "It has to be the same every time. All of these kids will grow up, and there will be a time in their lives where someone somewhere tries to tell them that's not true. So I need all of you to know deep down in your bones

that the people telling you that are wrong. And to do that, we need to use repetition! So that it sears so deeply into your memory even when you're old you don't forget it, and if people like that chase any of you away, my hope is those words can help you find your way back. I told him that was the stupidest thing I had ever heard of in my entire life.

But on Tuesday, when I got dropped off in front of the church, I opened the passenger door of my car to step out and saw, right at my feet, this tattered piece of a Pride flag lying in the gutter directly across from the building. And I didn't even need to look at the building to know our flags had been stolen again. But that same instant I spotted this little scrap, I heard my childhood pastor's voice echoing in my head **"...and that makes you a child of God forever, and no one can take that from you."** So perhaps his theory wasn't quite so stupid.

I'm sure many of you are aware of what has been transpiring at Wicker Park Lutheran Church—over the last three months our Pride flags, which for years we've been displaying year round outside our building, have been ripped down five times. The last time being this past Tuesday, where the thief also damaged part of our building in their zeal. Five days before that, a completely different person stopped his car outside the building, blocking traffic because he saw the flags and the sight of them upset him, so he started *screaming* a bunch of homophobic and transphobic things at a group of *children* who were hanging out in our front garden. And because it seemed like things were starting to ramp up, the church responded by telling our story more broadly, and vowing to replace our stolen flags with even more new ones after service today. And so for our visitors today, welcome! Thank you for joining us! Know that you are a **child of God forever, and no one can take that from you. I love you and I'm so glad you're in church today.**

I wanted to use scripture today to strengthen you all, give some reassurance and comfort that yes this period sucks and we don't like it but this is not forever and God neither hates you nor has God's back been turned on you, and in fact God loves us all madly. That God looks at her queer children (and her straight ones too) and names us very good. And to accomplish that goal, it seems obvious to me who I should turn to: the Apostle Paul. I know, with that statement I'm losing some of you already. Paul's words get wielded as a weapon against queer folks a lot, usually by people taking them out of context. But I have good news for you! Paul's words aren't a weapon against you. His words are your shield.

Paul felt *extremely* strongly that he had been called by the Holy Spirit to share the good news of Jesus Christ, the resurrection, and the forgiveness of sins to all people. He traveled up and down the Mediterranean preaching this message of God's love extended to all people. He'd meet people with customs and traditions different from his own, and his response again and again was "cool, amazing! Tell me more about your lives! Tell me about your hopes, tell me about your struggles, tell me about what matters to you!" And then he would *listen* as people shared with him about their lives and their hardships and joys. And then, from that, he'd begin to make connections and tell them about the love of God made known in Jesus Christ in ways that were meaningful and relevant to their lives.

A general rule of thumb if you're reading Paul, is that he is never addressing you as a singular person, but communities as a whole. Look at today's reading from Romans, there's a lot of "we" and "our" and "us" but not a single "you." Paul is not addressing one person, he's speaking to the *entire* church in Rome. And this was not a period of time where it was particularly fun to be either a Christian or a Jew in Rome. Roughly seven years before this, emperor Claudius had ordered both groups be expelled from Rome, as he mistrusted monotheistic faiths. Upon his death, Emperor Nero would let them return to Rome, although he was by no means an ally to these communities, but he wanted their labor. And so a couple years before Paul was writing these religious communities had started to return to Rome, (and the ones who had never left began to resume being open about their faith). They were still scorned and treated badly by the Romans, their presence was just... temporarily tolerated. During this time, the church in Rome knew all about hardships, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and the sword—not as metaphors, not as far off hypotheticals. These were the realities the community faced on a daily basis. They knew all about being hated and shunned and screamed at and robbed and attacked because of their identities. They knew all about the forces of Empire trying to erase them from society. But as Paul would remind them in his letters again and again, they were **children of God forever and *no one* can take that from them.**

In the face of this hatred directed against them, the church in Rome too dealt with the frustration and fear and exhaustion and sadness of it all, and struggled to put it into words. Today Paul tells us that we are not beyond God's comprehension when we reach this point. The Holy Spirit stands amongst us, and goes to God on our behalf with sighs too deep for words. In the end it doesn't

matter if you can articulate your jumble of emotions or not, God sees and hears it all--and no one can take that from you.

And then Paul starts throwing out words very rapidly and he doesn't define any of them. "For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to...and those he predestined he also called and those he called he also..." And I think that's the part where he just loses *everybody*. Which is unfortunate, because this is also one of the best shields in this passage. So here's that second paragraph from Romans in "normal words."

Things suck right now. But we know God loves the world, loves us, and loves justice. God is already this very moment at work to fix it. God knew in advance that God would save the universe, and would send Jesus to lead the people to God. To accomplish this plan, God called on the people to emulate Jesus, and restored the people to a right relationship—with God yes, but with their neighbors and all of creation too—and God named this work good.

Things suck right now, but God is already, this very moment at work to fix it. And that work is happening internally. When you, people of God, do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. When you emulate Jesus by welcoming the stranger, by seeking out the people society has cast aside. When you refuse to let the excuse of "that's just how it's always been" be used to justify hating and exploiting marginalized communities. When you show up in support and join the fight for justice. When *you* can look at any person you see on the street and even though they look or act or think differently than you still recognize that they too are **a child of God forever and *no one* can take that from them**. That's you, joining in this communal work, joining in God's saving works. Things suck right now, but God is at this very moment working to fix it *through us*. After service today we'll be heading outside to plant hundreds of pride flags in the front garden. As a vow that we stand firm in our commitments to our queer kin. God's love doesn't bend to the forces of hatred and neither does ours. And, as Paul puts it, God will look down on our work, and *glorify* it. Which is a churchy way of saying God will look down on us and grin and cheer and blast trumpets and yell "oh well done babies! Behold this is *very good*."

The forces of evil tremble and fall before our God of infinite love and mercy who loves us as children. We as a community, standing side by side, lifting up the broken and creating spaces where all can be seen and known as who God created

us to be, we will more than conquer the forces of hatred and intolerance at work in the world, through our God who loves us *so much*, always has and always will.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And my prayer for you is that you know, deep in your bones, that *you are a child of God forever and no one can take that from you. I love you and I'm so glad you're in church today.* Amen