

CALLED OUT

100 DEVOTIONS FOR LGBTQ CHRISTIANS

E. Carrington Heath

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| 1. Chosen Family | 2 |
| 2. Wading In | 4 |
| 3. Set Free | 6 |
| 4. Buttoned Down | 8 |
| 5. Prophets of Crumbs | 10 |
| 6. Ancestors | 12 |
| 7. Hated | 14 |
| 8. Crossing the Road | 16 |
| 9. Fierce | 18 |
| 10. Fight On | 20 |
| 11. The Gift of Pride | 22 |
| 12. Elders | 24 |
| 13. Grappling | 26 |
| 14. A Long Parade | 28 |
| 15. No Longer | 30 |
| 16. Humble | 32 |
| 17. Afraid of God? | 34 |
| 18. Casting Out Fear | 36 |
| 19. Your People and Mine | 38 |
| 20. Plans | 40 |
| 21. Worth Coming Home To | 42 |

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| 22. When to Stop Talking | 44 |
| 23. The Power of Water | 46 |
| 24. Overwhelmed | 48 |
| 25. Asleep in the Storm | 50 |
| 26. Send Me? | 52 |
| 27. An Honest Welcome | 54 |
| 28. Beyond DNA | 56 |
| 29. A True Friend | 58 |
| 30. Finding the Words | 60 |
| 31. Iron | 62 |
| 32. An Open Door | 64 |
| 33. Built to Last | 66 |
| 34. Panicked Faith | 68 |
| 35. Love and Work | 70 |
| 36. Conquered | 72 |
| 37. Pulled Back | 74 |
| 38. Laid Open | 76 |
| 39. Believed | 78 |
| 40. Enjoying Life | 80 |
| 41. <i>Imago Dei</i> | 82 |
| 42. Dust-Free | 84 |
| 43. Facing Down Lions | 86 |
| 44. Beyond Neutrality | 88 |
| 45. Loving the Child | 90 |
| 46. Five Stars | 92 |
| 47. A Wiser Generation | 94 |
| 48. Approved by God | 96 |
| 49. Strong and Tender | 98 |
| 50. Half as Hard | 100 |
| 51. Surprising Saints | 102 |

| | |
|------------------------------|-----|
| 52. Nonconformed | 104 |
| 53. God beside Us | 106 |
| 54. Brave | 108 |
| 55. Crashing the Barriers | 110 |
| 56. As a Son | 112 |
| 57. Allowing Joy | 114 |
| 58. Thrown In | 116 |
| 59. Alligators and Ice | 118 |
| 60. Masterpieces | 120 |
| 61. Holy Grounds | 122 |
| 62. Another Way | 124 |
| 63. Everyday Saints | 126 |
| 64. Open to Rearranging | 128 |
| 65. “Good Trouble” | 130 |
| 66. Mandate | 132 |
| 67. Holy Schisms | 134 |
| 68. Getting It Wrong | 136 |
| 69. Uneven Gifts | 138 |
| 70. Forgiving the Child | 140 |
| 71. Tending the Tree | 142 |
| 72. When to Start Talking | 144 |
| 73. Renewed for Resistance | 146 |
| 74. Asking for Wisdom | 148 |
| 75. Testify | 150 |
| 76. Armored | 152 |
| 77. Uncomfortable | 154 |
| 78. Grace for the Latecomers | 156 |
| 79. When It’s Not OK | 158 |
| 80. Subject | 160 |
| 81. Unhelpful Helpers | 162 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| 82. Getting Our Words Right | 164 |
| 83. Compassion for the Bully | 166 |
| 84. Telling the Truth about Sin | 168 |
| 85. The Greatest | 170 |
| 86. Saints in Training | 172 |
| 87. The Divine Baker | 174 |
| 88. Plans | 176 |
| 89. Laughable | 178 |
| 90. Coming Home | 180 |
| 91. Refusing to Shrink Back | 182 |
| 92. Provoked | 184 |
| 93. Setting Our Sights | 186 |
| 94. Read Together | 188 |
| 95. Dispatches from the Pit | 190 |
| 96. The Gifts of the Disagreeable | 192 |
| 97. Taking Notice | 194 |
| 98. Nothing | 196 |
| 99. Underdogs | 198 |
| 100. More Light | 200 |
| Notes | 203 |
| Thematic Index | 205 |

CALLED OUT

Chapter 1

CHOSEN FAMILY

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

—John 19:26–27

In his bleakest hour, when death was close at hand, Jesus was still giving life by doing something extraordinary: creating families.

We know that families are not made by blood, but rather by love. Parents and children open their hearts to one another in adoption all the time. Jesus reminds us, though, that new families can be created at any age in a multitude of ways.

Jesus looks at John, his beloved disciple, and at his mother. And in the moment before his death, he gives them to one another. He binds them together as a new family, responsible to and for one another, even after he is gone.

In the queer community, we create family too. Sometimes out of necessity, as when our families reject us, and sometimes because we are just so great that we can't imagine life without the others we love always being a part of it.

A straight friend of mine, estranged from her abusive family, once told me that the best thing the queer community had ever taught her was that we can have families of choice. We didn't create chosen families—Jesus shows us that. But I do think we just might do them better than anyone else in our culture. It's one of our exports—a gift we can give to the world around us.

For so many, family is a loaded term, fraught with pain and rejection. But it doesn't have to be. One of the queerest things we can do is, conveniently, one of the most Christian: create a family of the people you love, and the ones who also love you. It doesn't matter if it's bound by blood, or by law, or by love.

The people who Jesus would look at with love and say, "You all go together"? That's your family.

Prayer

God, thank you for my family. Both the ones I love who love me, and the ones out there that I haven't even met yet. Amen.

Chapter 2

WADING IN

They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?”

—Exodus 14:11

When the people of Israel were trapped between Pharaoh’s army and the Red Sea, they weren’t particularly pleased with Moses. “We had graves back in Egypt,” they shouted, sure that they were about to be killed. Moses told them not to be afraid, all the while calling out himself to God for help.

But God calls back, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to go ahead and go!”

Easier said than done. This wasn’t a small creek, and I’m not so sure everyone knew how to swim. But the legends passed down by Jewish rabbis tell us that one man, a guy named Nachshon, dared to stick his foot in the water. And then, he stuck in his whole leg. Then his torso. Then his neck. He kept going until the water was up to his nose, and only then did it begin to part.

There are times when we stand between the forces of death and the deepest sea, trying to decide what to do. That’s when God calls back, “What are you

waiting for? Dip your toes in the water, and then keep going. I'm waiting for you in the waves, ready to carry you safely across."

Prayer

God, help me to step into the waters of your love, even when I am terrified. Amen.

Chapter 3

SET FREE

*“And you will know the truth,
and the truth will make you free.”*

—John 8:32

I was an adult before I learned that quote was from Jesus. Most people learn this Scripture in church; I learned it from my father who was a CIA officer and taught it to me as his agency’s motto. He also was quick to quote it to me when he sensed some equivocation on my part. The implications were clear: “Tell me the truth, and you have nothing to fear. Lie to me, and we’re going to have problems.”

My dad was the kind of guy my friends both liked and feared a little. Even still, he was one of the first people I told I was gay, back in 1994. Despite his background, much to my surprise, he was also my biggest supporter. He told me that there would be people who would try to think less of me because of who I was, but I couldn’t accept that. I had to be who I was, and the world would adjust.

Later, I realized that his response made sense for a man who dealt in secrets. He saw the destructive power that they can have when we try to hide our own truths. He also saw that people who lived without

secrets were less apt to be threatened into silence or forced to compromise to survive. He wanted something better for me.

And, like any good parent, I believe God does too.

Prayer

*God, help me to find freedom from the tyranny of secrecy.
Amen.*

Chapter 4

BUTTONED DOWN

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

—1 Peter 4:8 NIV

I'm told that on our wedding day, right before the ceremony began, a key button fell off the back of my wife's dress. She did not know this because her matron of honor, our close friend, did some intrepid maneuvering just before the organ prelude began, and cinched the fabric closed.

I've always been incredibly grateful to her for not burdening Heidi with that particular crisis right before we exchanged vows. After all, we were about to do something extraordinarily foolhardy. We were about to stand before people we loved and promise to love one another for the rest of our lives, in sickness and in health, and in just about any other condition you could find. Not only that, but we'd written our own additional vows with even more promises, many of which we invariably break on a weekly basis.

So, the button? It was the last distraction we needed in the moment. But in another sense, that moment when one friend helped another friend not to sweat the small stuff has come back to me again and again.

When we have some minor crisis, one that feels big in the moment but is about as significant as a faulty button, I remember that I don't have to let it distract me from the big picture: At the end of the day, I love her, and she loves me, and we are in this thing together. When I can focus on that, I know that nothing can ruin the day so long as she still wants to walk by my side.

Prayer

God, when little things seem big, may the grandness of love overshadow it all. Amen.

Chapter 5

PROPHETS OF CRUMBS

She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

—Matthew 15:27

Jesus told a Canaanite woman who was looking for healing for her daughter that he would not help her because, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Matt. 15:26). In other words, she wasn’t Jesus’s target audience. I’m going to put aside all the scholarly interpretations of this text that tell you why Jesus wasn’t being a complete jerk here and focus on what really matters: that woman and her courage.

Her daughter needed healing. She needed it enough that her mother crossed over the lines of gender, race, and religion and found hope in a man who just might have a solution. And yet when she asked for help, he responded in the most unjust, hope-crushing manner imaginable.

I would have been gone at that point. Forget this guy and his prejudices; who needs him anyhow? But that Canaanite woman wouldn’t budge. She stood face-to-face with him and said, “But even dogs get the crumbs.”

She wasn’t calling herself a dog. I think she was shaming Jesus for his shameful words. She was

reminding him that she was a child of God too, not an animal, and that she deserved not just the crumbs, but the full meal.

Jesus heard her, praised her faith, and healed her daughter. That's not the real miracle of this text, though. The real miracle is that woman who dared to speak up and confront injustice. Without her, nothing changes.

Prayer

God, make me a miracle today, that I might make miraculous change in this world. Amen.

Chapter 6

ANCESTORS

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

—Hebrews 12:1

In the early morning of June 28, 1969, the New York Police Department, as they had so many other times, raided the bar. That was nothing new. What was new was that in a moment of staggering resistance to a world that hated LGBTQ people, a group of trans and queer folks decided enough was enough. The Stonewall Riots are marked by many as the flashpoint of the modern LGBTQ civil rights movement.

It is said that as the police began rounding up club patrons to arrest, Stormé DeLarverie, a 47-year-old person of color who has been described as everything from a “butch lesbian” to a “drag king,” handcuffed and bleeding from an officer-inflicted head wound, looked up at the crowd and shouted, “Why don’t you guys do something?” Reports say that when Stormé was then shoved into a police van, the crowd finally decided to do something they’d never done before: fight back.

Eight days earlier, Neil Armstrong had stepped foot on the moon, becoming the first person to ever do so. Everyone around the world knew his name, as they should. Armstrong's moon walk would open up new opportunities for the world. But it would be nearly 42 years before I would learn the name of Stormé DeLarverie, who in that same month had done something that would open up new opportunities for me, and for queer and trans folks everywhere, in every bit as radical a way. The shout from the door of a police van left an imprint as deep as a boot on the surface of the moon.

In the summer of 2019, as the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall approached, the New York Police Department apologized for its actions that night. Stormé, who died in 2014, wasn't around to see it. Part of me wonders whether Stormé would have even accepted that apology. Who knows? But one thing I do hope Stormé would accept is my thanks. Because without that call to the crowd, without that moment of witness, the life I live now, one of opportunity and joy, might have felt just as distant as the moon once did.

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for the witnesses who have gone before us. May they shine as bright as rockets in our memories. And may we always "do something" for the ones who come next. Amen.

Chapter 7

HATED

“If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. . . . If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.”

—John 15:18–20

No one wants to be hated. Not really. We might shrug it off and say we don't really care, but deep down the idea that someone truly despises us is unsettling.

And yet, if you are reading this book, chances are pretty good that someone hates you. I don't mean “you” specifically. You are probably a very nice person. But if you are some variation of LGBTQ, or you care about us, that's good enough to be hated in the minds of some.

People hate what they fear. It's one reason Jesus was hated enough to wind up on a cross. Why? Because Jesus was stirring up trouble, undercutting the religious authorities and, most dangerously, spreading hope. And so, the powers that be killed him. Simply put, Jesus was too powerful to be allowed to live.

He did live, of course. Yes, he died, but death was not the last word. In the end all the hatred and violence of the world did not get the final word. God's love and hope won the day.

When I came out, it was the hatred of people of faith that hurt me the most. Even when it was couched in those soft-sounding code words like “love the sinner, hate the sin,” I knew it was still just well-wrapped hatred. A new Christian myself when I came out, I began to wonder if I had made the wrong choice in being baptized. Surely this wasn’t what the gospel meant. And if it was, I wanted no part of it.

All these years later, the church has changed. Kids who grew up in the churches that hated people like me are now adults who work for the inclusion of all. I’m glad. But there are days when I wonder whether being hated by a large segment of society actually made me a better Christian. Don’t get me wrong; I don’t want to go back there. But, early on in my faith life, I had to come to terms with the fact that following Jesus sometimes meant being hated.

Learning how to live with it and find my worth in Christ’s love rather than the world’s inoculated me against the hatred that the world has for anyone who stands up against the powers that be. On the days when the life of faith is hard, I remember that even Jesus was hated into the ground. And then I remember that in the end that hatred was so weak that, quite literally, it could not keep him down.

Prayer

God, I pray that no one hates me. But if they do, I know that I am in good company, and I know that with you, I rise. Amen.

Chapter 8

CROSSING THE ROAD

“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. . . . Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

—Luke 10:33–36 NIV

During the early, fear-filled years of the AIDS crisis, HIV-positive patients experienced heartbreaking discrimination even in their hospital beds. Medical professionals, those who theoretically should have more knowledge and compassion than the general public, were loath to touch those with AIDS. It was as if those who were infected bore a giant scarlet letter.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus talks about a man who is traveling when he is robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. As he lays there, two men from his own community, religious officials at that, cross the road to avoid him, and leave him there without help.

It is not until a Samaritan sees the dying man that anyone dares to cross the road and help him. The Samaritan binds up his wounds, takes him to an inn,

nurses him to health, and tells the innkeeper to keep him there on the Samaritan's own tab until he finally heals.

Jesus asks which of the three men was the neighbor to the dying man? And the answer is clear: the Samaritan.

It's a call to compassion, one that reminds us to cross the road, even when we are afraid, and to extend care to those in need. And yet, that's not the most radical part of this story. The most radical part is that it is a Samaritan, a member of a group the dying man likely looked down upon, who was a neighbor to that man in need.

To put it in other terms, it isn't just a doctor going into the room of a man with AIDS in 1988 and daring to touch him. Instead, it would be like the man with AIDS crossing the road to save the life of a rabid homophobe who thought AIDS was a just punishment for a "life of sin."

There will always be those who fear us without reason. And yet, they cannot define us. Most of us know what it is to lay on the side of the road in need. Because of that, we will not allow another to do the same. And that, our character, no matter what they call us, is what will define us.

Prayer

God, give me compassion for others, even when they might not give the same to me. Amen.

Chapter 9

FIERCE

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*

—Psalm 139:14

I had just turned 22 when I started seminary. Fresh out of college, I was young, naive, and unsure of myself. The church at that time, even the most liberal branches of it, was unsure of people like me. Wandering the halls of seminary, I wondered if I had made a mistake. Had God really called this queer and gender-creative young person, just a few years removed from my teenage years, to the ministry?

I turned to my mentor, who was a generation older than me and also gay and a minister herself, for guidance. Together we decided to mark my transition into seminary through a brief ceremony reaffirming my baptism. That day, she held my own worship book in her hands, looked down, and read from this Psalm.

I'm not sure if I had ever heard Psalm 139 before. If I had, I hadn't taken it in. But on this day, the words found my heart: "Fearfully and wonderfully made." Created by God. Made to be exactly who I was, and sent into this world to fulfill this calling as I am.

Over two decades later, every time I read this Psalm I think back to that day. Was it a cure-all? Did

my fear and uncertainty leave me all at once? Was I suddenly able to live without self-doubt, confident beyond measure? No. It would be a journey of years, one that some days I'm still on.

But it was a start.

Recently I preached a sermon on this Psalm to my congregation. I wanted to explain what it meant to be “fearfully and wonderfully made.” It was that “fearful” word that I knew would trip people up. And so, though I am far from a Hebrew scholar, I went back to the original root of the word.

What I found is that the “fearfully” of Psalm 139, could be better translated today as something like this: fierce. In other words, long before *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Queer Eye*, God was calling you “fierce.” That means that God is also calling you into the world, in all your created wonderfulness, to be fierce.

And so, that's your job for today. Go, and be fierce. This world could use some fierceness. After all, it's just how God made you.

Prayer

Creator God, I pray to you because I am fierce, and I know it. Amen.

Chapter 10

FIGHT ON

Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

—1 Timothy 6:12

In the church, we are sometimes a little too good at defining others by rigid categories. I'm not even talking about identities like race or gender or sexual orientation (though we would still do well to let others define themselves). I'm talking about things like our Enneagram types.

I am, according to my wife, an Enneagram 8. She tells me that this means I am a “challenger,” someone who doesn't shy away from confronting injustice, and who loathes the control of others. As I told my wife, I didn't need a test to tell me that.

I prefer to think of it this way: I'm someone who takes “fighting the good fight” seriously. Now, I'm not someone who advocates violence. I've never thrown a punch in my life. But I believe in standing up for what is right and I'm willing to risk rocking the boat if need be.

Sometimes in the church, people like me get a bad rap. We are told we are “contrarians” or that we are somehow creating unrest. In the worst moments, we

might be labeled with that worst of all church epithets: unchristian.

But here's the thing: I'm now able not only to be a member of a church in good standing, but to even serve as a pastor in that church because somewhere along the line people like me stood up and rocked the boat. Women, queer folks, trans folks. They had had enough of sitting below deck, told to just be grateful they were allowed onboard. They knew they had gifts that were being wasted down in steerage.

The word this passage uses for "fight" can also be translated like this: to struggle, to race, or to contend. It's not about throwing punches or knocking one another to the ground. It's about caring enough about something to be willing to risk disturbing the peace for it.

There will be times when you will be told to be quiet. Maybe you'll be able to feel others getting frustrated with you and wishing that you would just "let it go." And, maybe there will be times when that is the right thing to do, but no fight for justice or equality was ever won by being more concerned about making friends with certain people while other people were still suffering. After all, when they call you "contentious," it literally means you are caring enough to contend.

That's why sometimes, as hard as it is, we must choose to fight the good fight instead.

Prayer

God, make me a fighter, not for myself, but for all of your children. Amen.

Chapter 11

THE GIFT OF PRIDE

*Pride goes before destruction,
and a haughty spirit before a fall.*

—Proverbs 16:18

Conservative Christians sometimes level judgments at LGBTQ Pride events based on name alone. Pride, they argue, is one of the “seven deadly sins,” after all. (Never mind that the list is a completely human-made invention.) To be proud is to prepare for your own fall, Scripture tells us.

If we think about pride in the traditional sense, maybe that’s true. The proud person seems boastful, self-assured, and strident. They value themselves more than others, and think they possess a sort of specialness that elevates them above the crowd. When they do fall, whether we admit it or not, there might even be a certain sense of *schadenfreude* on our parts.

The theologian Paul Tillich argued that pride was the occasion for all sin. And, if you’re talking about the kind of pride that lacks humility and denies the humanity of others, perhaps that’s true. But in the late 20th century, feminist theologians, aware of the ways women are subjugated, pushed back. For women, they argued, it was not an abundance of pride that

kept them from becoming who God had created them to be. Instead, it was the exact opposite.

For LGBTQ people, as well as for any others who have traditionally been denied their full dignity, pride is a radical claiming of God's image in us. When we feel pride in who we are, including our queerness or transness, we are more capable of living into God's plans for us in the world. For us pride is not hubris. Pride is the exact opposite of that.

That's because true pride is not a belief that you are better than anyone else. True pride is an understanding that God has made you just as wonderfully as everybody else. True pride is understanding that you have important work to do in this world, and that being queer or trans is not a barrier to this work. Instead, it is part of the tools that God has given you to do the work of your life.

Prayer

God, I have a lot of work to do today. Thank you for the tools you have given me to do it. May I be proud enough to use every single one. Amen.

Chapter 12

ELDERS

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life.

—Proverbs 13:14

A friend of mine is eighteen years older than me, just about a full generation older. I met her as a confused 20-year-old kid, both newly Christian and newly out, and still trying to figure out how I could be both. I met her for the first time having no idea that she was both queer and Christian as well.

She's been a guide for me for more than two decades. In college, she helped me buckle down enough to graduate. In seminary, she asked the big questions that helped me see where God was leading me. Even now, if I get stuck on some challenge in my work as a pastor, I know I can pick up the phone and get some good advice from her.

Along the way she's encouraged me, affirmed me, and believed in me. But that's not to say that she's always been easy on me. She's always been the first to tell me when I've gone in the wrong direction, and the first to remind me to get back on the right path.

I got frustrated with her early on in our relationship and asked, "Why are you so hard on me?"

I can't remember her exact response, but I do remember the meaning. She held me to higher

standards not because she was mean or punishing. She did it because she cared about me and wanted me to grow into the person God had created me to be.

Everyone needs guidance from time to time, especially from someone a little ahead of us on the path of life. At the same time, it can be tempting to stay away from someone who will call us to account. Being told to stop making excuses and do the right thing can be hard to hear. But, when it's done by someone who cares enough about you to tell you the truth, their words can become a fountain of life.

The trick is finding the right people to fill that role. What no one tells you is that you get to pick your own elders. You don't have to take advice from every person willing to give it to you unsolicited. You can look for people you can respect who will also respect you; those who live their lives with an integrity you want to recreate in your own life. Eventually, even on the days they challenge you, you'll be glad that they're there.

Prayer

God, bring true elders into my life, people who will tell me the truth and lift me up along the way. Amen.

Chapter 13

GRAPPLING

Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

—Genesis 32:26b

When I was in seminary, I decided to start taking judo classes at a local dojo. Like most people my age who were born female, my official participation in contact sports was prohibited when I was growing up. I loved playing tackle football or wrestling with neighborhood boys and was sad when they got to head off to the high school teams that allowed them to keep playing.

Me? I headed off to the golf team, perhaps the least contact sport ever.

So, when at 22 I found myself grappling on the mats at the dojo, it felt both familiar and forbidden. But I gave it a try. I convinced one of the stronger black belts to teach me how to win a match on the mats. Equally matched for weight, I would use all my strength to try to pin him down. He would simply flip me back onto my back and tell me to try again.

Scripture tells us that Jacob was alone one night in the wilderness. A man came and began wrestling with him. All through the night, to the dawn, they grappled. Then the man said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking" (Gen. 32:26a). But Jacob would not stop wrestling until the man blessed him.

Sometimes my relationship with God has felt like a pleasant walk through the world, side by side and peaceful. But other times it's felt as hard as those grappling matches back at the dojo. Every time I think I've got God pinned down this time, God somehow manages to get the upper hand.

I don't think God is a bully, who throws around God's weight to defeat us. Instead, I think God loves us enough to get down on the mats with us, and to let us keep trying and striving. I think that somehow God respects that. In fact, I think God respects it enough, that God blesses us when we care enough to stay in the struggle.

Prayer

God, on the days when I go to the mat with you, please don't leave me without a blessing. Amen.

Chapter 14

A LONG PARADE

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

—Romans 8:18

Somewhere in a box at the back of my closet is a picture from the summer I was 19. A small group of us, fewer than ten or so, were marching by Piedmont Park in the Atlanta Pride parade. We represented our local university; our group consisted of all the students, staff, faculty, and alums who dared to march.

We felt pretty good about having almost ten. It was a record turnout.

Later that school year, Atlanta would be gripped by a series of bombings, including one at a lesbian bar. My friends and I flooded into the bars the next night, on high alert for stray backpacks or packages. By our presence we were saying that our community wouldn't be intimidated by those who hated us.

This morning I opened my Instagram account and saw a series of photos posted by my alma mater's official account. In picture after picture, different groups of students, undeterred by the rain and accompanied by the school's costumed mascot, marched through downtown Atlanta. I couldn't even count how many were there.

I believe God calls us to be courageous in the struggle. Not just for ourselves but for the future.

The work is far from done, but seeing that so many young people who inhabit the same spaces I once did now feel free to come out is a testament to the fact that one generation paves the way for the next. The struggles of my generation compelled us to make it easier for the next, just as the struggles of the generations before mine made it possible for even the ten of us to be marching freely down that street over twenty years ago.

I wonder what Pride pictures will look like twenty years from now. Will those students look back at the pictures from recent years and wonder about what it was like to be queer in an era when the rights of LGBTQ people were under a fresh round of attacks? Will they realize that in a time of struggle, those young people were marching for them?

We all stand on the backs of those who have struggled for us. And God calls us to be ladders to glory for those who come next.

Prayer

God, just as others have struggled for me, help me to struggle for others. In this, you are glorified. Amen.

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