

## **“Building a Bridge”**

Entering into a relationship of respect, compassion and sensitivity with the LGBTQ+ Community

In early May, I had the opportunity to attend a virtual talk led by Fr. James Martin, SJ and organized by St. Ignatius Parish of Winnipeg. Fr. Martin is an American, Jesuit priest who had no previous background in ministering to the LGBTQ+ community. This changed dramatically on June 12, 2016, when a 29 year old man killed 49 people and wounded 53 others in a mass shooting at the Pulse Nightclub, a gay nightclub, in Orlando, Florida. The lack of response to the massacre, from the local and national clergy, spurred Fr. James Martin to call for change.

Fr. Martin’s outreach ministry involves lecturing to many various groups which has led to authoring the book *Building a Bridge*. In his book, Fr. Martin invites the Church into a relationship of more understanding towards the LGBTQ+ community.

He does this primarily by highlighting three Gospel stories. The first story is found in *Matthew 8:5-13*. When Jesus is in Capernaum, a Roman centurion comes to Jesus appealing for his help in healing his paralyzed servant. Jesus answered that he would come and heal him and was amazed by the Centurion’s great faith. Notice who Jesus is speaking with - a Roman Centurion, who is not a Jew and in fact, believes in many different gods. Jesus doesn’t answer the Centurion’s request by saying “No, you are not a Jew.”, “No, you don’t believe in God.”, “Go away from me, you are a sinner and a colonist.” Jesus responds to him with compassion and attends to his need and heals the servant.

The second Gospel story is found at *John 4:1-40*. While travelling back to Galilee, Jesus passes through the land of Samaria. There, in the hottest part of the day, he meets a Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus asks for a drink and the woman is puzzled. Jesus offers her something better than the water at the well. He offers a most special kind of water so that she will thirst no more and will lead her to eternal life. Again, consider who Jesus is speaking to. Samaritans and Jews did not interact, especially a Jewish man with a Samaritan woman. The Jews believed that Samaritans were ‘half-breeds’ and savages. She comes to the well in the height of the day and hot sun. We learn that she does this to avoid the crowded well in the cooler morning where she will be judged by the others. It is revealed that the woman has been married 5 times and is now with a man who is not her husband. Jesus doesn’t respond by saying “You are different from me.”, “You have a scandalous sexual past.” “Go away from me, you are a sinner and adulterer.” Instead, Jesus offers her understanding and a great gift.

The third Gospel story is found at *Luke 19:1-10*. Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in Jericho comes to meet Jesus. Zacchaeus, because of his short stature, climbs a tall sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. Out of the crowd, Jesus greets Zacchaeus and invites himself to his home. Zacchaeus is joyful upon the invitation but the crowd begins to *grumble* because Jesus chooses Zacchaeus. Let's look at who Jesus is interacting with. Zacchaeus is a tax collector, considered the biggest of all sinners of the day and highly despised as they were believed to pad their own pockets. Jesus sees past all of this, shows him mercy, forgiveness and considers Zacchaeus, a friend.

The Roman Centurion was not of a culture or faith that Jesus believed in. The Samaritan woman was an outcast because of where she came from and her very controversial sexual history. And Zaccheus was seen as an outright sinner. He is marginalized by society and discouraged to build a relationship with Jesus.

Do you see the similarities in how these characters were treated and how society treats LGBTQ+ people? How do these Gospel accounts form us in how to respond to those in our communities who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, queer, transgender, non-binary, bisexual?

Fr. Martin invites us to respond as Jesus did and still does to this day - with compassion, empathy, mercy, understanding, respect, patience.

And practically, HOW do we do this? Fr. Martin breaks it down into 3 parts. First, we must LISTEN. Next we must WELCOME. And lastly, we are to ADVOCATE. We may not have all or even any answers, but listening to their experiences and feelings is a significant first step. As baptized Catholics, LGBTQ+ individuals are just as much a part of the Church as any other member. We need to welcome them to the Church that is already **their** Church. They possess God given gifts that we should welcome as any other member. The LGBTQ+ community is the most marginalized group in the Church and in fact, society in general. To advocate for them is to restore their God-given human dignity.

Simply put, will we act with **love** as Jesus did, for **love** is the most important Church teaching, or will we be a part of the grumbling crowd?

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