

Silence = Death

A Sermon by Rev. Shawn Fiedler | June 14, 2020

Have you ever seen the poster “Silence = Death”? It was created in the late 1980s and featured the pink triangle--used by the Nazi’s in their concentration camps to identify queer prisoners. The poster made its rounds in tributes and obituaries a few weeks ago when late May, Larry Kramer quietly passed away. Now I have to tell you that there was very little about Larry Kramer and the life he led that was quiet.

In the early 1980s when AIDS was beginning to destroy queer communities across the United States, Larry began to speak out. He co-founded the Gay Men’s Health Crisis with the goal of raising public awareness of the disease plaguing our community. And they did a lot of good.

Still, the disease swelled, swallowing up an entire community and no one seemed to be paying attention. AIDS remained but a footnote in major newspapers, health agencies were constricted by red tape, key leaders in government couldn’t even mention the word AIDS. His friends, his neighbors were dying, the community was collapsing and all the while Larry Kramer got angrier and angrier, and louder and louder.

He joined with others whose patience had run out and they launched ACT UP--a AIDS activist organization with an emphasis on urgency and action. ACT UP adopted the slogan ‘Silence = Death’ and silent, they were not.

They protested in front of the headquarters of the FDA, they staged ‘die-ins’ in the streets, chained themselves to the White House gates, barged into newsrooms on air, disrupted worship services and shut down the New York Stock Exchange. They couldn’t, wouldn’t stop shouting.

Larry Kramer led activists in sit-ins and shout-outs and protests to pressure mayors and pharmaceutical companies, and even Dr. Anthony Fauci because those who were in charge were not acting quickly enough, boldly enough, and queer people were dying. And as the disease raged on, so did the activists.

Larry Kramer refused to be patient or play by the unwritten rules of those in power. He wouldn't lower his voice and when people urged him to soften his tone, be quiet or else "You'll scare everybody to death." Larry responded, "Good because you should be afraid, because it's frightening."

Eventually all of Larry's pushing, shouting, and protesting began to make change--hard fought, long-awaited for, not yet there, change.

Dr. Fauci has since said he appreciated Larry Kramer's anger and shouting. He said: In American medicine, there are two eras: Before Larry and after Larry. He said, "There is no question in my mind that Larry helped change medicine in this country. And he helped change it for the better."

Now Larry didn't always get it right. He was one of the most controversial figures in the queer community in those days.

Yet, one thing cannot be denied: Larry Kramer refused to be silent.

Now if you know your history, you know that the LGBTQ community, our movement has rarely been silent.

It began at the Stonewall Inn with the shouts and cheers of black and brown trans women, Marsha P. Johnson and Silvia Rae Rivera, when one late June evening in 1969, they decided they were sick and tired of the raids and the harassment and abuse of the New York City Police and determined they couldn't be silent anymore.

The echoes of their shouts reverberated across the nation and suddenly it was like that moment when the instruments at the symphony begin to play and the music swells. LGBTQ folk everywhere began to come out, stand up and speak out.

They started to observe and remember that first black and brown queer uprising by marching--out and in public--despite the fear of losing their jobs, their families, their lives.

And their voices and chants became louder and louder, year after year as marches began to pop up around the globe and the queer community gathered to shout out, be bold and be proud.

Now I love Pride. Our Pride Parades today are a fabulous, sometimes outlandish celebration of our LGBTQ and Ally community. A chance to don our brightest hues, fill the streets, cheer each other on, and revel in our accomplishments. And to be clear there is a lot of which we should be proud. Not the least of which is this church with our Open Door, which has long celebrated that all people, all people, were created in God's beautiful image.

But this year, we are coming face to face with two deadly pandemics--one of coronavirus and the other of racism. And perhaps this year's Pride requires something different from us--from all of us--allies included.

We mark this year's Pride, while a nation is still in mourning for the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmad Arbury, Tony McDade. We unfurl our rainbow flags this year while the Coronavirus disproportionately plagues black and brown communities and while Trans women of color continue to die without the dignity of collective outrage.

The truth is, this year we need something different.

Perhaps it's time that we get back to basics, back to our roots, to an LGBTQ+ movement born out of and sustained by defiance, resistance, and solidarity, but most of all, a refusal to be silent.

Because I have to wonder, despite the progress we have made, if we don't, if we sit back and do nothing now, if in this moment we remain mute, what will we really be proud of in the future?

This Pride, it's time to speak out and act up against systemic racism that has propped up our common life for too long. It's time to go into the streets or to give our money or to flood the phone lines of elected officials. It's time to do

everything we can to stand with our black and brown siblings and to make some holy noise.

You see it's not just the LGBTQ way, it's the Christian way. Over and over again in the bible, God commands, not suggests, not hopes, but commands that we loose the bonds of injustice, that we refuse to follow the norm if the norm is wrong, and that *we remember* that we too were once strangers in Egypt striving for a different freedom and that we shall not stand idly by as our siblings strive for theirs.

God has told us what to do. God has given us instructions for just, moral, living, and it's up to us to make it a reality because God will not do what God has given **us** to do.

God will not do what God has given **us** to do, which is to put our bodies, our voices, our good intentions where we say they are: in solidarity with those who cannot breathe.

God will not do, what God has given **us** to do, which is to act-up and act-out, be bold and proud, to never *never* let up in the cause of justice, to follow in the footsteps of the Saints: of Marsha, and Sylvia, and Larry, to yell and shout, to make some holy noise so that this pride we lend our voices to support those of our black and brown siblings and together, we drown out the sins of racism and violence because:

Silence, Silence = Death.

Amen.