

A few months ago I was running errands with, Julia, the young South Sudanese woman I spoke about in an earlier exercise. She related a conversation she'd had with our rector at coffee, "He said he has a husband, does that mean he is gay?" I felt like a deer in the headlights. I've been a staunch LGBTB+ ally for many, many years, but I've never had the conversation I saw was coming. Sometime ago, a friend related a similar experience that resulted in a group of young African families leaving our congregation. I hoped I would never be in those shoes.

When I answered yes, she immediately asked, "How can he be a priest?" Her tone reflected the Leviticus view I had learned many African Christians have about homosexuality. I swallowed and answered, "He is as God made him and all God's creation is good." My truth is that simple. I used to try to find a more complicated rationale, but that's as far as I ever got. Julia got very quiet and we didn't discuss it any more. I wondered if she would stop coming to church. In fact, she didn't show up the following Sunday, but I later learned that wasn't the reason. She did come back.

So this was the first time I had really been asked to "Stand and deliver." Many times, I've wondered what I would do if pressed and I've reflected on what I did informally often since it happened. And now I'm going to use the Window Method on it.

What did I learn about myself in relationship to the church? First of all, I learned that I am able to speak to my truth, even when the subject is controversial. Further, I can do it solo. I've never been shy about speaking up at church meetings, etc. when I'm in the company of like-minded folk. Indications were Julia came from a whole different viewpoint.

What did I learn about myself in relationship to the wider community? It was not a new lesson, but because I'm drawn to work with the immigrant/refugee community, it was good to be reminded how important it is to know as much as possible about the other person's culture. To that end, I'd like to learn more about the Quran.

What did I learn about others in their relationship to the church? I learned that people can change, and often will, if given an honest chance. This is really Julia's story. She hasn't shared her feelings on the subject with me since that conversation, but her behavior tells me she has grown from it. She appears more comfortable with the rector than ever. And I have loved being privileged to watch her.

What did I learn about others in their relationship with the wider community? This experience reinforced my understanding that community is dynamic. What happened before won't necessarily happen this time. I realize in hindsight that much of my fear of the subject was based on my friend's experience.

What will I do with this learning? I'm certain this question will come up again, in fact it already did. Our church building is home to three congregations. St. Andrews has been deliberately open and affirming to the LGBTQ+ community for at least 25 years and is now pretty diverse. The Dinka community is made up mostly of former Sudanese "Lost Boys." The Darfur Community is Moslem. Both were severely persecuted in Sudan. Up to this point, they have not questioned our position. Both are cultures that do not acknowledge that homosexuality exists.

Never-the-less, it creeps in. After I sent you my proposal about my experience with Julia (who is not Dinka), I was checking on a friend, Debora, who is a leader in the Dinka community about how they were all faring during the pandemic. She in turn asked about my family, and then the rector's, including his wife. After I explained that he has a husband, I shared that it puzzles me that Jesus was stern about divorce, but said nothing about homosexuality and we discussed how people who would exclude gay persons would never dream of condemning divorce. We ended cordially.

So the topic is going to come up once and a while throughout my ministry, but I'm happy to say, I've gained confidence in my ability to lead such discussions.