

Our Psalm this morning offers praise for God who “executes justice for the oppressed.” But what exactly do we mean when we talk about oppression. One definition that works for me is oppression is the unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power. The unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power.

This past Thursday, I had the honor of attending and participating in LGBTQ Lobby Day with a few folks from this church: Mike Schrader, Tracy Lyons, Trisha Halonen, Maia Halonen, and Sam Menk. This is an event organized by our friends at OutFront Minnesota to bring together lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning individuals and their allies to advocate for the rights of LGBTQ persons with our lawmakers. We were given booklet that listed 6 bills for which we were to encourage our lawmakers’ support and three for them to oppose. Obviously it is not possible to do justice to 9 bills in a 30 minutes meeting, so in each of the two meetings I, decided to focus my attention on one single issue: Conversion Therapy. This practice also goes by the title “reparative therapy” and “ex-gay therapy”. To use the word therapy for these practices is an insult to therapists everywhere. Conversion therapy is a practice by which mental health professionals employ physically and mentally abusive techniques in an attempt to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. This practice is also performed by clergy and spiritual advisors but unfortunately, when conversion therapy is done by a religious professional, the government considers that a religious practice and so it falls under the separation of church and state.

The proposed conversion therapy ban would prohibit the practice of conversion therapy on children or vulnerable adults. Violating the prohibition would not be a crime, but would result in professional consequences such as losing one’s license. I decided to focus my efforts on this bill first because it seemed like legislation that should be non-partisan. Major health organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association, the American Medical Association, the American Counseling Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics have all

condemned this practice.<sup>1</sup> Who doesn't want to protect our children from abuse at the hands of people who are supposed to provide healing? And second, because a dear friend of mine from seminary experienced this abuse at the hands of her pastor. While this bill wouldn't have prevented that particular case, I would hope that the more this practice is condemned, the fewer and fewer clergy would be willing to engage in it.

Before I share how our meetings went, I would like to share with you a first-person account of conversion therapy written by Sam Brinton which was published on NCLRights.org as part of the #bornperfect campaign.<sup>2</sup> Here is Sam's story:

"Months before my seventh-grade year, I realized I had a crush on my best friend, who happened to be male. I was too young to understand why anyone would think this was wrong and that not everyone would support me. After beatings failed to work, and at the beckoning of my church, I was put into conversion therapy, the dangerous practice used by some therapists and counselors to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. For me, and countless others like me, it can only be described as mental torture.

I was told I was sick. I was told God hated me. I was told every other gay person on earth had been executed. By the end of the so-called "treatments," I believed the government was looking for me, that I had somehow contracted AIDS, and that I would die alone. The mental pain this caused is something I cannot fathom going through again, yet thousands of youth across the country are placed in the same situation every day.

When psychological abuse was not sufficient to change my sexual orientation, my therapist moved to what can only be called physical abuse. My hands were tied down and ice was placed on them while I was shown pictures of men. Later sessions would include copper heating coils, needles in my fingers, and electric shocks. Similar to Pavlov's experience with dogs, I was supposed to associate the touch of a man with pain. By the end, even hugging my father brought on flashbacks.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hrc.org/resources/policy-and-position-statements-on-conversion-therapy>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nclrights.org/bornperfect-sam-brinton/>

To end the pain those years caused, I would go on to attempt suicide several times. During one attempt, I climbed onto the roof of my apartment building and looked down. In that moment, I decided I would rather lie and tell everyone I had become straight than jump. It worked. For a while the torture stopped, and my life returned to some degree of “normality.”

It wasn't until college that I was able to come out and begin my life being who I am. Once I finally started living truthfully, everything got better. I threw myself into school, extracurricular activities, and advocacy.

This year, I graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology with dual master's degrees in nuclear engineering, and technology and policy. I am living proof that what conversion therapy can destroy, self-acceptance can save.

Today, I know who I am. I'm strong in my faith, and I'm strong in my identity. And I know that I can't change what I never chose.

This torture continues to have repercussions with youth, but it doesn't have to continue. We have the chance to save LGBT youth from ever having to experience what I went through.”

Lest we think that this practice is rare or a thing of the past, a new report from the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law reported that tens of thousands of LGBTQ youth who are currently between the ages of 13 and 17 will undergo gay "conversion therapy" from a licensed health care professional, religious adviser or spiritual leader before they turn 18.<sup>3</sup>

Sam's story is a resurrection story. The oppression of conversion therapy and pressure from his church and his family, pushed him literally to the edge of death. And while that process of resurrection, of being able to step away from the ledge and eventually become whole again, is miraculous and beautiful, wouldn't it be so much better if young people like Sam never got to that edge in the first place? As a people of faith who see the divine spark of God in every human being, who

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/80-000-teens-will-undergo-conversion-therapy-near-future-study-n841356>

proclaim that God created us with a diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, we are called to protect the most vulnerable in our midst.

We don't have to turn our attention to countries on the other side of the world to find examples of oppression. There are many forms of oppression that are alive and well in this country and in this state. The psalmist reminds us that our God who made heaven and earth, who keeps faith forever, is a God who seeks justice for the oppressed. But that does not mean we get to sit back and wait for God to do the heavy lifting. This is where our faith must become political. Not partisan. A politically engaged faith does not need to pick a party. But as people of faith, we can and must show up to amplify the voices of the oppressed, especially when those voices are not old enough to vote.

I have been asked by a few people how the lobby day went. The first word that comes to mind is frustrating. The anti-conversion therapy bill that I thought would surely be something that anyone from either party could support, even regardless of their opinions of LGBTQ people, did not have the support of my two representatives. The first response I received was that parents should be allowed to parent in the way they choose. Implying that we should let parents do whatever they think is best, even if that means taking their child to a therapist because they believe their child might be gay or gender non-conforming, and allowing that therapist to torture that child in the name of making them "normal".

The response I received from the second meeting were things I was less prepared to answer. Comments like "abuse is already illegal." The problem is that the abuse that occurs in Conversion therapy is often psychological and extremely underreported. But adding professional consequences should act as a deterrent to both parents and professionals considering this practice.

It is not enough for us to be outraged that oppression occurs and then pray that God does something about it. We have to show up in person, or by phone, or in emails and letters, not just as concerned citizens and allies, but as people of faith. Our lawmakers need to hear that people who identify as Christian don't hold a

singular view. They need to hear that we are fighting for the rights of our LGBTQ siblings not despite our faith, but because of our faith, that we are adamant about protecting the earth not because we believe in science instead of God, but because we believe in science AND God, that we are fighting for safety and care of refugees not because we are bleeding heart liberals, but because we belong to a faith tradition that proclaims “Do not mistreat or oppress the foreigner for you were foreigners in Egypt.”

Our faith and our politics are inseparable. For the sake of our planet and for our fellow human beings, we have to show up in as many ways as we can, wearing our faith on our sleeve. May it be so. Amen.