

Letter . . .

*A message from the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston,
Chaplain, to the whole Trinity College
(Hartford, Conn., USA) community...*

Chaplain's Reflection

I saw on the news today that Matthew Shepard died. He was the 22 year old man from Wyoming who was beaten and tortured and left to die for no reason other than he was a homosexual. This tragic murder has raised a national debate again, the kind of periodic soul-searching our society goes through whenever a crime of hate startles us into awareness. The burning of Black churches, the bombing of innocent people, the death of a shy young man from Wyoming: these events suddenly shake us out of complacency and remind us that fear, prejudice and rage are always the shadows just beyond the light of our reason. And so people suddenly start to speak out. There are voices of outrage and grief. Voices of sorrow and demands to know why such a thing could happen. And predictably, there are also defensive voices: the governor of Wyoming trying to explain why his state has no laws to protect people from hate crimes and the leadership of what is called the Christian "right wing" trying to explain why their national ads against homosexuality don't influence people to commit such violence against gays and lesbians.

In the days to come, these many voices will fill our media and the cultural consciousness it imprints until we are once again lulled into the more familiar patterns of our lives, dozing off as a nation until the next tragedy rings the alarm of despair.

As the chaplain for our community, I would like to invite us all to consider Matthew's death in another way. Not through the clamour or denials, not through the shouts or cries of anger: but through the silence of his death, the silence of that young man hanging on his cross of pain alone in the emptiness of a Wyoming night, the silence that ultimately killed him as surely as the beatings he endured.

Silence killed Matthew Shepard. The silence of Christians who know that our scriptures on homosexuality are few and murky in interpretation and far outweighed by the words of a saviour whose only comment on human relationships was to call us to never judge but only to love. The silence of our elected officials who have the authority to make changes but prefer to count votes. The silence of the majority of "straight" Americans who shift uncomfortably when confronted by the thought that gays and lesbians may be no different for themselves, save for the fact that they are walking targets for bigotry, disrespect, cheap humour, and apparently, of murder.

Crimes of hate may live in shouts of rage, but they are born in silence. Here at Trinity, I hope we all listen to that silence. Before we jump to decry Matthew's senseless death or before we seek to rationalize it with loud disclaimers: I hope we will just hear the silence. A young man's heart has ceased to beat. Hear the silence of that awful truth. It is the silence of death. It is the silence that descends on us like a shroud.

At Trinity, as in Wyoming, we are men and women surrounded by the silence of our own fear. Our fear of those who are different. Our fear of being identified with the scapegoat. Our fear of taking an unpopular position for the sake of those who can not stand alone. Our fear of social and religious change. Our fear comes in many forms but it always comes silently. A whispered joke. A glance to look away from the truth. A quick shake of the head to deny any complicity in the pain of others. These silent acts of our own fear of homosexuality are acted out on this campus [Trinity] every day just as they are acted out every day in Wyoming. Through silence, we give ourselves permission to practice what we pretend to abhor. With silence, we condemn scores of our neighbours to live in the shadow of hate. In silence, we observe the suffering of any group of people who have been declared expendable by our society.

As a person of faith, I will listen, as we all will, to the many voices which will eulogize Matthew Shepard. I will carry that part of our national shame on my shoulders. But I will also listen to the silence which speaks much more eloquently still to the truth behind his death. I will listen and I will remember. And I will renew my resolve never to allow this silence to have the last word. Not for Matthew. Not for gay men or lesbian women. Not for any person in our society of any colour or condition who has been singled out by persecution. Not in my church. Not in my nation. And not at Trinity College.

The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston, Chaplain of Trinity College, may be sent email at:
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Connecticut, USA.

1:45 PM

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is asking questions.
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1:57 PM

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