

“No One Erased”  
February 3, 2019

Genesis 1:26-31

A few weeks ago I went to see the movie, “Boy Erased,” at the Parkade Cinema over in Manchester. Based on a true story, the movie is adapted from an autobiographical book written by Garrard Conley and published back in 2016. In this season of movie nominations and film festivals, it feels to me like “Boy Erased” has flown under the radar in terms of publicity and word of mouth. Then again, it’s not an easy movie to watch.

Lucas Hedges plays a teenage boy in the movie. His father is a passionate, evangelical pastor, played by Russell Crowe, who lives and preaches at a church in Arkansas. Meanwhile, his mother, played by Nicole Kidman, sits in the front pew of the church every Sunday.

When Lucas Hedges goes off for his first year at a nearby college, he is assaulted on campus and subsequently outed by one of his college classmates as gay. As soon as his parents hear the news about their son, Russell Crowe calls together some of his evangelical pastor colleagues, and they advise him to send his son to a “conversion therapy” program. What happens over the course of that conversion therapy program constitutes the bulk of the movie’s storyline.

The theory behind conversion therapy is that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people can have their sexual orientation changed to heterosexual through various manipulative psychological and/or spiritual interventions. Thankfully, the whole idea of conversion therapy has been widely debunked as ineffective and downright dangerous by scientists, psychiatrists, many Christian leaders, and the LGBTQ community. Unfortunately, as the movie, “Boy Erased,” indicates when the final credits roll, more than 700,000 gay, lesbian and bisexual people in this country have endured the trauma of conversion therapy programs during their lifetime.

As a Christian pastor, I think it was particularly difficult for me to watch “Boy Erased.” In spite of their love for him, Russell Crowe and Nicole Kidman cannot move beyond their unyielding religious dogma to embrace their son for who he is. Even if it means subjecting their son to a program that teaches self-loathing in a destructive and ultimately impossible effort to force him to become heterosexual.

Meanwhile, there is one especially disturbing scene in the movie where another young man in the conversion therapy program is deemed unsuccessful in changing his sexual orientation. As the young man lies on the floor, he is surrounded by family members and program leaders who strike him repeatedly with their Bibles as a way of “beating out” the sinfulness inside him. And one of the family members in that circle is a little girl, probably no more than eight or nine years old, who has her own Bible in her hand. With a terrified and distraught expression on her face, she wonders why she has to participate in hitting and humiliating her big brother.

In spite of the fact that conversion therapy programs are no longer viewed as credible or widespread. And in spite of the fact that this country and many faith communities have come a long way in recent years in terms of understanding and acceptance. The truth is that Christianity has an ugly history of judging, condemning, shaming, ostracizing, and harming gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

Christian dogma that defines homosexuality as inherently sinful and immoral has resulted in families torn apart. It has divided Christian denominations and faith traditions. It has fueled the kind of brutal hate crimes we see in the news on a regular basis, including actor, Jussie Smollett, just this past week. And it has caused irreparable scarring in the lives of our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender brothers and sisters, many of whom consider the Christian church not just unwelcoming but actually unsafe...

As powerful movies have a way of doing, "Boy Erased" has stayed with me in the weeks since I've seen it. It's also caused me to think a fair amount about the wider church and this church's response to the LGBTQ community going forward.

Just over two years ago, at our Annual Meeting held on January 22, 2017, Wapping Community Church voted to officially become a designated "Open and Affirming" congregation. In doing so, we joined more than fifteen hundred other Open and Affirming, United Church of Christ Churches around this country. And we adopted the following "Open and Affirming" statement...

*"We, the members of Wapping Community Church, United Church of Christ, recognize the foundational importance of the prayer of Jesus; "That they may all be one"(John 17:21) by inviting all people into the full life, ministry, leadership, fellowship, sacraments, mission, and responsibilities of our congregation.*

*The sacred worth of all people as unique individuals made in the image of Christ is welcome here. Whatever age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, or physical, cognitive or emotional ability, we invite you to find a safe and nurturing spiritual home at Wapping Community Church. All are welcome to participate in the life, leadership, ministry and mission of this church as we seek to grow together in our faith community."*

After months of study, prayer and dialogue, voting to become "Open and Affirming" was a bold and important milestone in the life of Wapping Community Church. It's so important, in fact, that we indicate our "Open and Affirming" identity at the top of every worship bulletin. But becoming an Open and Affirming congregation means more than just a written designation. Beyond simply stating that we are open and affirming, our ongoing responsibility as a faith community is to embody that statement.

I don't mean to imply that Wapping Community Church is failing to live up to our open and affirming designation. I think this congregation does a really good job welcoming new people among us, regardless of who they are. I think we find ways in this church to work for justice on behalf of a number of marginalized communities in this world, including LGBTQ

communities. As a congregation, you have recognized and honored my own ordained call from God to marry couples who want to unite themselves in sacred covenant, no matter their gender. And a number of people have told me over the past two years that voting to become Open and Affirming was one of their proudest moments as a member of this church.

But just like becoming Open and Affirming was a process, being Open and Affirming is also a process. Part of that process means we need to continue stating clearly every single Sunday morning, “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome at Wapping Community Church.” And it means we have to find ways to repeat that message in other places and at times other than Sunday morning. So that we can continue changing the historical narrative and undoing the trauma inflicted on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people by rigid and dogmatic Christians.

What else does it mean to be Open and Affirming? Among other things, it means reaching out to youth and young people who are struggling to come to terms with their own identity to let them know our youth groups are safe spaces where there won’t be bullied because of who they are or who they are becoming. It means continuing to remind parents and family members of the importance of unconditional love and acceptance if their child chooses to come out of the closet.

And it means interpreting and re-interpreting the sacred language of our Christian faith. In the very first chapter of the very first book in the Bible, we heard these words in this morning’s Scripture lesson. “So God created humankind in God’s own image.”

Can you imagine a God who loves every single one of God’s children so much that God created us in God’s image? Whatever the color of our skin, God created us in God’s own image. Whatever gender identity we claim for ourselves, God created us in God’s own image. Whether we consider ourselves able or we live with some kind of disability, God created us in God’s own image. No matter how old or young we may be, God created us in God’s own image. Whether we are single or married or widowed or separated or divorced, God created us in God’s own image. Whether we struggle with a physical or mental illness, God created us in God’s own image. If we have plenty of money to keep us comfortable or we barely earn enough to make ends meet or we don’t know where our next meal is going to come from, God created us in God’s own image.

And it doesn’t matter who we love; straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or anywhere along the sexuality continuum. The Bible tells us right from the very beginning that God created humankind in God’s own image. You, me, all of us in here, people out there, everyone.

I believe the Christian faith given to us as a gift by God and revealed to us in Jesus Christ makes it abundantly clear. Each person has sacred worth. All people are welcome. And no one gets erased.

Secure in the Christian faith made known to us, our sacred task remains. Together let us continue the process of being open and affirming here at Wapping Community Church. Amen.