

Audio Snapshot II: In the Chapel

Rich: So, we're actually stepping into Christ the King Chapel right now, which is a church-size chapel . . . we'll go along this way . . .

And this is, I think, oddly, for me, one of my favorite spaces to come.

And I say oddly only because, you know, you have all the trappings of traditional Catholicism, and when we're talking about issues of sexual morality, or any, really, moral issue, I often find myself nuancing what the Catholic Church says, or disagreeing outright.

And for some reason I still believe that, you know, after all this time that, when all is said and done – I don't think any of us really know what God is, or all the mysteries of The Divine – but I have a very strong feeling that all the images that we look at, if they're meaningful at all, will, at the end of it, say that we were on the right side of history and morality for standing up and challenging the Church and society . . . on these issues.

So, anyway, this is just a favorite spot for me.

Walking to a new location in the Chapel

Our Lady of Perpetual Hope is the stained-glass window right here.

And the image of the Virgin is looking out at the audience and saying . . . you know, "behold my son. Look at what trials and tribulations he will go through. Look what suffering he will go through, and what is your response?"

And so I think, especially for the LGBT community, when I look at this particular Icon, and I've thought this for years now, that if you actually are a follower of Christ, I can't imagine how your religious imagination could possibly allow you to hate LGBT people or actively seek to discriminate in any way whatsoever . . .

And so when I look at Our Lady of Perpetual Hope, you know, her gaze to the audience, you know, "Do you see the suffering of my Son?"

I always count in that suffering . . . The Christ who came to suffer with, and for, the LGBT community; not to condemn us or to forgive us of sin, but to, actually, to straight people who would use privilege and power to literally put us under foot. So it's meaningful to me on those levels too.

Stephen: Where does this hate come from, because most of the bible says, “Don’t judge, don’t hate,” under God’s laws. What’s going on here? What’s behind that?

Rich: Well, I think that their understanding of divine love is such that you are only loved if you accept particular creeds. You are only loved if your theology lines up correctly.

And so they can say something like “I love you, but I hate what you’re doing, or I hate who you are and what you’ve allowed yourself to be.” And what they mean by that is . . . They believe themselves to have something of the unconditional love of God for you in the sense of a hope that you’ll be saved, which really just means “We want you to think like us, act like us, believe like us, and we will, in a theoretical sense, love you, in the sense of “we’re not going to actively try to kill you,” right . . . or they’re not going to say “Well, you are damned forever . . . we’ll still love you; we’ll still hold out hope that you’ll be like us.”

But that’s what that means: They want you to be like them.

Me: It’s my understanding that the only argument against homosexuality is the religious argument. If you take that away, what can you do?

Rich: I don’t think that’s the only argument against gay and lesbian civil rights; it’s the predominant one in our time.

In particular, somebody will say it this way that “Americans have a right to religious faith. A number of religions believe that gay and lesbians’ relationships are wrong, therefore, they should be allowed to vote and protect marriage civilly on the basis of their religious perspective, and if they can’t do that, or if civil marriage is opened up, it’s violating their civil rights. Well that’s plainly false.

The argument is a false one. It’s rhetorical. It gets people riled up.

If you tell them . . . that their religious rights are being taken away . . . or they really like to play the martyr, right, so even if they are in a kind of majority in particular places, [if] you can get a preacher or speaker to stand up and say, “We are going to be the targets, we’re going to be persecuted.”

Well that also funnels into a lot of their end-times theology as well. That somehow we’re going to turn a corner really quick and Christianity is going to go away and they’re going to be part of a remnant.

]Well, that just gives them their motivation to put on their so-called “Armor of God” and fight the good fight against an America that you know, in the pulpit they’ll say is the worst place to live, but interestingly enough, these same people

on political talk shows will turn around and say this is the greatest country in the world and that this is God's nation.

And so what they're really doing is very political and it's not true, the religious argument isn't true, descriptively, it's just not true.

Me: I have a hard time wrapping my head around this idea of "you're stripping us of our religious freedoms" at the same time they're stripping others of theirs because we live in a country where specific faiths are welcoming to the gay community.

They have no problem stripping away the rights from Freedom of Religion, if they want to use the Constitution, but they love to do a role-reversal and play the victim.

Rich: What this really means is when they say there's a freedom of religion, for many of them, what that actually means is freedom of Christianity as they interpret it. I think, you know, we saw no better example of this than rising kind of up out of the fringe right, if even not the Tea Party where there was an argument being made that Islam is not actually protected under Freedom of Religion in this country, that it's only the religions of the bible, whether it's Judaism and Christianity.

So a lot of these people have a hard time understanding that Freedom of Religion actually means Freedom of Religion; it means freedom of Hinduism and Buddhism and Islam and Daoism . . . and all the different Christianities and . . . everything, right? They don't see that. They just see it as freedom of MY religion.

Me: What purpose does it serve to use the bible as a weapon against the gay community?

Rich: *I think it only works, because the bible is still regarded broadly in American culture as "The Book of Truth."*

It's purely symbolic. So anything that's been around long enough that has an association with "the good," "the truth," "the authority."

They don't take the time to actually study how the bible came together, So it's an effective weapon because symbolically it's an authority.

So . . . You can hold a bible in your hand and wave it around, and what you're really doing is holding a symbol.

You don't study it; you don't stand in front of crowds; you don't give lectures on how to read this book carefully, or the many books carefully . . .

You don't hear from these people on how to listen for God's wisdom to speak through; you don't hear them talking about how to take passages and put them in relation to other passages in the same book, or different books within the canon.

You just don't hear that because they're just using it as a symbol of authority to prop up their argument. It's an old trick . . . and they've been doing it for a long time.

Stephen: And religious institutions, for centuries, have been a form of government, have taken the place of government, and today we certainly see a crossover, I mean the Constitution, as you referenced, says "separation of church and state."

What we're seeing with LGBT issues is this crossover between the religious governments, quote-unquote "institutions," crossing into the political spectrum where you have people pushing their morals – values - and making law based on their religious beliefs.

***Rich:** I think that what's happening in modern-day American politics is people are forgetting that we are not mob-rule and that we are not a direct democracy. We use these words "democracy" and "vote" and everyone has a right to vote, and then we do strange things with it.*

We are constitutionally ruled and so, yes, we do have the power to vote, and that is an amazingly powerful thing, but the will of the people can never override the principles of the Constitution, so it's part of the beauty of having the checks and balances of the Judiciary. So, if the will of the people or even a ruler, whether it's a legislature or an executive, whether a President or a governor or what have you, if they go against the principles of the Constitution, the Judiciary can say "you can't do that!" even if you have 60% of the vote, you can't do that on the basis of the Constitution.

Well we've completely forgotten that and the narrative is now "Well if it's the will of the people, it must be the law of the land." That is not true, and it's un-American.

And that's where I think most religious conservatives, fundamentalist zealots, today, have gone wrong. They're not American in the governmental sense. What they really are, are theocratic and they would like to use a direct democracy in order to create the theocracy that they want, and once they have that, democracy will go away and they'll rule by their religious law.

Me: We saw that with the Mormon Church, with Proposition 8 in California; \$22 million dollars, funding, so that the public could vote against the gay community for their right to get married under the Constitution.

Rich: Oh, that's absolutely right. We see it in, I think, every single state and to different degrees.

I mean, what do you say to Catholic Bishops or to Evangelical Ministers who are sending thousands of dollars to out of state initiatives to stop gay and lesbian people from getting civil marriage rights? That's crossing a line.

It's one thing for them to hold a particular conviction that they do. That's their right as an American. But to think that somehow, or that they would encourage their people to fundamentally work against the structure of our nation and the type of liberties that we maintain; that's not only scary, that's dangerous to our freedoms.

Sound of Footsteps, walking to a new location in the Chapel

Rich: *Another interesting thing about this particular Chapel is they will ask me to lead a certain number of ecumenical services in here.*

So it's always a little bit . . . I don't know what the word is to me . . . I guess interesting, it could be ironic, or funny I suppose, that I'll be sitting, you know, in the center, up front of this Chapel, with my full clergy robe on, and stoles and hood, and yet, you know, when it comes down to "this is a chapel of the Roman Catholic Church," and I oppose their teachings on sexual morality, strongly, the theology that motivates me in that area, is sitting right on their altar.

Rich: *So it's interesting to me that it was religion that for so long held me captive to whether or not I could ever truly come out.*

And it didn't happen within a Catholic context, like we're standing in this Chapel now, but, while I was at a Protestant Seminary they had given us just enough Greek and Hebrew to read the manuscripts that we have of the Bible, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

And so I remember climbing up into like the sixth story of our seminary library and opening up the big, you know, the old Hebrew Scriptures, the old Greek texts and going through to the half-dozen passages that are always used – the Clobber Passages as they're called – against gay and lesbian people.

And I remember reading them in their original language for the first time, and I started shaking because I realized they were not talking about me. And I had to make a choice.

I had to either stand for what I believed was true, which was to come out and to fight boldly, not only for myself, but for other people, or I could hide, and I could hide behind the theologies and the doctrines of the church . . . and I was shaking because I know myself too well to know that once I'm convinced of something there's no turning back.

And so I knew that night in the seminary tower, I had to stand. And it was on the basis of being liberated from the very text that people were using to condemn me. I found, in fact the opposite message.

So, you know, to stand in a Chapel and to see all the iconography, to remember my own history, there's a bitter-sweetness to it.

On the one side, I find, spiritually, you know, the strings of justice that are proclaimed in the Hebrew prophets . . . I find that here [In the Chapel]. You know, I find that message of, no, it's not about being Republican or a Democrat, it's not about taking a political side. It's about standing for all people, and for the dignity of all people and to be willing to lay your life down, and to believe, have a kind of an audacious hope that there is a God who is not Zeus sitting on a mountain, but is a god who is actually empowering you to do this.

That's here, right? That's here! That's the Christ on the Cross, is the god saying "no," right, to evil, "no" to oppression.

I don't take the step that says "And God sent Jesus and he had to die, and if he didn't die you'd go to hell." No I don't think that's the message at all.

The message is, "God is here. God is with us. God is on the side of the oppressed, you know, which is not to say that God is not on the side of the oppressor, but god is most certainly on the side of the oppressed."

And I dare anybody to look around and look at the ancient iconography and not find that message. Not find the message of a god not only who goes with us into our suffering, but offers the promise of resurrection. Now take that as literally or metaphorically as you want, but . . . just look around.

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It's all here; it's just how we look at it.

You know, I'm at the place now in my life, when I look, all I see is the voice of liberation, and so I can walk in here and feel the sweetness of liberation. I think where it gets the bitter part of the bitter-sweet is when people come in in robes and with authority and start proclaiming things in the name of this God that I don't accept, and can't accept.

Stephen: With most religion that we know, there's not a huge amount of expansion or flexibility. They live by rigid rules, and I've learned in my own research that a lot of those religious rules lead to rejection of others that don't fit into this very tight classification of how one should live.

And here you are, standing in, basically, a Catholic Church, a gay man, standing at the head of the Church, at the altar.

Rich: And, as a Protestant too! I mean, it says something about this particular place, which is why I do love this community so much because of their willingness to live with certain principled tensions.

There are a lot of, obviously, historical examples of the church being rigid, as you just said, but there's also a lot of examples of the church throughout history being on the side of the poor and the oppressed; being on the side of those who are marginalized by powerful political enemies.

One of the things that history will look back and say is that the church has been selective about when it's rigid and that it does have a rich history of actually being quite wonderful and prophetic in that sense and being generous in its inclusion of people. I think we'll just look back on this and say "how very arbitrary that, not just the Catholic Church, but how many of the churches decided to become rigid on this particular issue.

And there are reasons for that.

You know, you can look back into the history of Christendom itself and see the movement of sexual aestheticism and how it really came to dominate the church. And we're only beginning to heal in the 21st century.

It's painful, right? But at the same time, I also have an icon for that, right? The Christ who was crucified by the larger power, the larger authority, who failed to listen, who really made charges and accusations against the historical Jesus that simply were not true, or could never be true, however you look at it.

That also is the lesbian, the gay, the bisexual, the transgender person; the straight ally is on that cross . . . right?

In the sense that institutions, especially religious institutions, not all of them, but a lot of them, are literally excommunicating, exiling, condemning, right, gay and lesbian people.

And, so, you know, that is the irony, I suppose, that with the same cross that many of them raise to condemn and exile and excommunicate, is the same cross that can be lifted up with a broad religious imagination to see, no, no, no . . . you know, what they are doing to us is in exactly what they did, in a parallel way, to Jesus.

You might as well look at the cross and, you know, traditionally, the "King of the Jews" is written above his head in a mocking sort of way. Well, you might as well write above that "Fag." You might as well write above that "Dyke" and condemn the one who came to identify with all humans.