

RECONCILING IMAGES VIDEO STUDY - SESSION 1, "Philadelphia"

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GOALS: To consider how LGBTQ people have been presented in television and movies, how this has impacted American popular culture, and how Christians act or react.

EXPECTATIONS: Respectful, thoughtful conversation. You can attend one or all sessions, as these are independent. Kids are welcome but parents should use discretion as some of the movies/TV shows deal with adult themes. Bring a snack to share - each week we'll ask one person to bring a more substantial main dish.

SESSIONS	MOVIE/EPISODES (rating, hh:mm)	MAIN DISH
Sunday, July 28, noon	Philadelphia (PG-13, 2:05)	_____
Sunday, August 4, noon	Queer Eye: God Bless Gay (TV-14, 0:51)	_____
Sunday, August 11, noon	The Matthew Shephard Story (TV-14, 1:34)	_____
Sunday, August 18, noon	One Day at a Time (TV-PG, 1:30)	_____
Sunday, August 25, noon	Hannah Gadsby: Nanette (unrated, 1:09)	_____

PHILADELPHIA (PG-13)

Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington star in this award-winning 1993 movie that was one of the first mainstream films to deal with homosexuality, AIDS, and homophobia.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Introductions - who we are, what we hope to gain from this small group, main dish volunteers
- What is the journey of Denzel Washington's character regarding comfort with homosexuals? What changes or doesn't change for him, and why?
- Who claims to speak for a "Christian" point of view most clearly in the movie? Do you agree or disagree with their point(s)?
- At the time (1980s), some Christians claimed HIV/AIDS was a divine punishment for homosexual behavior. Why might someone make this claim? What are some counterarguments?
- Does this film or true story seem to be more about human acceptance, disability rights, LGBT stigmas, or discrimination? (*see appendix below*)
- How do stigma, fear, and disgust play a role in any community's acceptance or denial of those who are different? Are these visceral reactions part of why we use the term "homophobia?" (*appendix*)
- If a church does not serve all equally, could a church be denying someone "the last thing in the world that meant anything" to them?
- How do the current LGBT marriage rights relate to medical expenses, views of someone at work, and the subjectivity of performance perceptions?
- If we are still afraid of handing out hugs, are we also still afraid of those who carry any related stigmas?

Beth Mattson provided some great research and questions for further thought - see appendix.

APPENDIX (Beth Mattson)

In August 1984, Geoffrey Bowers joined Baker McKenzie as a litigation associate. In April 1986, he was diagnosed with Kaposi's sarcoma and AIDS. In May 1986 the law firm's partners gave Bowers a satisfactory evaluation. Two months later, in July, they voted to dismiss him, without following normal termination procedures, including consulting with his supervisor or asking for a list of his clients and billable hours. His supervisors objected to the decision, delaying its implementation. However, in October, 12 of the 15 partners again voted to dismiss him. He left the company on December 5, 1986. A representative for the firm claimed that Bowers was dismissed because of performance issues, while his complaint charged that he had been fired from his job because of the skin lesions that had begun appearing on his body and face. Bowers died on September 30, 1987, in Boston at the age of 33, just two months after the hearings began.

The hearings took place on 39 days over the course of two years. It took more than six years for the case to finally be resolved, when in December 1993 the agency awarded its largest sum for any complaint to that date: \$500,000 in compensatory damages and the backpay he would have earned had he remained employed. Baker McKenzie appealed but subsequently withdrew the appeal in 1995 after they negotiated a confidential settlement with Bowers' family, forbidding parties from ever discussing the case or the terms of the agreement.

One year after Bowers' death, producer Scott Rudin had interviewed the Bowers family and their lawyers and, according to the Bowers family, promised them compensation. Family members claim that 54 scenes in the film were very similar to events in Bowers' life, and that some of the information in the film could only have come from their interviews. The family sued for compensation, and the lawsuit was settled in 1996. Although terms of the agreement were not released, the defendants did acknowledge that the film was "inspired in part" by Bowers' story.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Bowers

Does this film or true story seem to be more about human acceptance, disability rights, LGBT stigmas, or discrimination?

How do United Methodists feel about discrimination, acceptance, civil rights, and stigma in general?

FEAR & STIGMA

In the coming weeks doctors at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center used radiation therapy to try to shrink the size of his [Bower's] lesions. He also tried to hide them with cosmetics. "People told me it wasn't working," he testified. "But it did in some instances, did modify the bright, purplish -- that awful kind of garish, glaring purplishness so that people, fewer people, would stare at me in places like on the bus or on the trains, at the office, everywhere." ... "In light of the fact that I was dealing with my AIDS and my Kaposi's sarcoma, I merely felt as though they had taken the last thing in the world that meant anything to me," he testified.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/21/nyregion/vindicating-lawyer-with-aids-years-too-late-bias-battle-over-dismissal-proves.html>

How do stigma, fear, and disgust play a role in any community's acceptance or denial of those who are different?

Are these visceral reactions part of why we use the term "homophobia?"

Is it fair, loving, or godly to deny anyone out of squeamishness or other biased discomfort?

If a church does not serve all equally, could a church be denying someone “the last thing in the world that meant anything” to them?

LEGAL STATUS

Mr. Bowers is seeking \$250,000 for his medical expenses. He wants back pay as well as reinstatement of his health insurance and good standing as a lawyer to prove that job performance was not an issue in his dismissal.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/15/nyregion/lawyer-with-aids-charges-job-discrimination.html>

How do the current LGBT marriage rights relate to medical expenses, views of someone at work, and the subjectivity of performance perceptions?

<https://why.org/segments/20th-anniversary-of-philadelphia/> :

“We didn’t want to make a film that would appeal to an audience of people like us, who already had a predisposition for caring about people with AIDS,” Demme said in a recent interview with WHYY/NewsWorks. “We wanted to reach the people who couldn’t care less about people with AIDS. That was our target audience.” [Jonathan Demme, Director] “He [character Atty Miller] gave voice to the fear and the stigma to all the things that were holding people in getting involved in this or learning more about it. It was realistic.” “For them [film extras who were HIV+], this wasn’t a movie. This was how they lived their lives, with courage and great grace. And that wasn’t lost on them,” says Kevin Burns. “I think for many, they got some peace and some sense of accomplishment that their struggle was being documented.”

What is the significance of the director’s phrase “people like us?”

Who currently doesn’t “care less about people” with HIV, AIDS, or other at-risk populations, without “getting involved or learning more about it?”

Which other formats of materials or cultures can we look to in order to witness “how they lived their lives, with courage and grace?”

“Dr. Michael Bruffman, an infectious disease doctor specializing in HIV at the time, who’s still practicing at Pennsylvania Hospital, couldn’t watch the movie. “I felt like we were living it, day and night. I didn’t want to see another patient die,” he says. He kept a handwritten memorial list, several pages long, documenting the names of patients he’d lost. It’s a list he has saved to this day.”

Which communities might currently be facing similar, dire situations that do not receive enough attention before and while they face their traumas?

“I personally see for myself that a lot has not changed,” she says, pointing to how some neighbors won’t let their kids near her house. Last year when she was hospitalized, she says staff wouldn’t touch her skin. Some people taunt her best friend, who’s gay.” [Suellen Kehler, only known surviving HIV+ extra from film]

In which ways do we perpetuate unrealistic stigmas instead of fully caring for those in need of complete humanity?

“Nationwide, there are an estimated 50,000 new HIV infections a year. Here in Philadelphia, the per capita rates of new HIV infections are three times the national average, with roughly 700 to 800 newly reported cases in the city each year. [2013] “There’s a lot of people who don’t know they have this epidemic,” says Boston Canary, a local prevention specialist who can be found in Philadelphia neighborhoods passing out condoms, raising awareness about the disease. Some headway has been made. A longstanding needle exchange has been credited for curbing HIV infections among people who inject drugs. “I keep telling them, there’s four ways you can come into contact with HIV,” says Canary, who is particularly concerned with all the new HIV infections cropping up among young adults. “And they’re like, ‘Not by hugging?’” This worries Gary Bell, director of Bebash, who says even “educated, smart” people he knows think the disease is fully tamed, pointing to things like the continued good health of basketball legend Magic Johnson. “The problem is that up to 75 percent of people who are HIV positive are not getting the right level of care, meaning they either don’t know their positive, they’re in and out of care or they’re just not getting the kind of quality care that keeps their viral load down.”

Do we continue to stigmatize both LGBT and certain illnesses at the expense of perpetuating the negative consequences for each?

Are we so afraid of the phrase “sexually transmitted” that we do not actually welcome and support those who we fear may participate in either of the words jointly or severally? Do we apply this equally to each community?

If we are still afraid of handing out hugs, are we also still afraid of those who carry any related stigmas?

“HIV is also a disease that stalks the poor. Kevin Burns sees that trend, as the current director of ActionAIDS, Burns says the virus just piles up on top of other challenges people face daily, like mental health needs or finding a stable place to live: “The reality today is housing is treatment because they can’t access treatment and have it be effective if their homeless.” Housing, for example, is one area of focus for activists in Act Up, a longstanding AIDS group that’s still has a chapter in Philadelphia today.

Do we stigmatize those experiencing poverty the same as those who are LGBT, addicted, or ill?

“It definitely put in perspective why we have to fight and change,” says Alvarez.

Why did it have to be a fight for Bowers, the film characters, LGBT communities, addicts, or ill people?

Do we begrudge communities “fights” for equality, truth, or justice?

<https://glreview.org/article/the-philadelphia-phenomenon/> :

“Although hoping to educate the film’s audiences, Demme was concerned about alienating its straight viewers by frankly depicting the sex lives of gay men, and so he tread lightly here. Indeed, one might not realize that Tom Hanks’ character, Andy Beckett, is gay until his longtime lover appears in his hospital room fifteen minutes into the film. Admitted Demme: “I didn’t want to risk knocking our audience back [twenty]feet with images they’re not prepared to see.” Many gay viewers objected that Joe Miller (Denzel Washington) and his

wife were shown affectionately hugging in bed, while Andy and Miguel (Antonio Banderas) shared no similar scene. Some critics regarded Andy's ecstatic experience of an aria sung by Maria Callas as a gay cliché. Perhaps most damning was Andy's contraction of HIV in a gay porn theater. A spokesperson for the Philadelphia AIDS Consortium said of the porn cinema allusion: "The movie seems to say that simply by going there, Andrew put himself and his lover at risk for AIDS."

How can we recognize and work to fix our perceptions of stereotypes, biases, and inequality in and out of church settings?

How might not wanting to alienating straight communities prevent LGBT communities from disclosing the full impact of church stigma, discrimination, and pain to church members?