

“Ya can’t go around Willy”

When I first see Willy, he stands tall near the front of the congregation, dressed in women’s clothing. We have gathered for Holy Eucharist at a small inner-city mission of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, Holy Comforter Church. Willy, like most of the other worshippers that morning, lives with a chronic mental illness, sheltered in one of the several group homes in the neighborhood. Many, like Willy, are African-American. Most subsist on a small disability check and Medicaid. It is one of my first Sunday’s there as a postulant for Holy Orders.

Months later, after a summer away doing clinical pastoral education, I see Willy again. This time he wears men’s clothing and stands beside Teresa, a slight woman with strawberry blond hair. Her illness affects her even more profoundly than that of others in the congregation. She is demanding, impulsive, and often loud at the wrong times. Yet, she and Willy form a close, though sometimes fraught, bond.

I witness their friendship for almost a decade, for after seminary and ordination, I serve as Vicar to the parish and director of its day program for neighbors living with mental illness. Over those years, I see many of the faces of Willy: artist, pan-handler, gardener, crack addict, psalmist, and scholar. He carries two large tote bags filled with heavy books and sometimes shares his poetry with the congregation. He can also be loud, disruptive, and frightening. Everyone in the parish knows these faces of Willy.

Near the end of my tenure, I rise to offer a brief homily at our mid-week service, taking my cue from the Collect for the Sixth Sunday of Easter in *The Book of Common Prayer*: “Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things may obtain your promises”

I ask the congregation to share things in which they love God. Some mention the beauty of our gardens, to which several have contributed, others the art produced in our studios, others the meals served from our kitchen. Then I suggest that they look to their left and their right and ask whether they can love God in the persons sitting beside them. Everyone nods easily, and I sense that I have not challenged them. It is easy to love God in the beautiful and the filling. It is easy to love God in those by whom you choose to sit.

In that moment, I notice Willy sitting near the front, and I ask, “What about Willy? Can you love God in Willy?” Before anyone can nod and without hesitation, Willy declares, “Yeah, ya can’t go around Willy to get to God!”