



## Gomes, Peter (1942-2011)

by Linda Rapp

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Minister, educator, and author Peter Gomes courageously came out publicly as a gay man after a homophobic issue of a student publication at Harvard University led to tension on campus. Afterwards, he lent his eloquent voice to the cause of equality for gltbq people.

Peter John Gomes, born May 22, 1942 in Boston, was the only child of Peter Lobo Gomes and Orissa White Gomes. His father, a native of the Cape Verde islands, came to the United States as a young man and found work in the cranberry bogs of Massachusetts, eventually earning a job as a superintendent. Gomes's mother, the daughter of a Baptist minister, was a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music.

Gomes's parents valued education. They took their young son to the museums of Boston, had him take piano lessons, and provided him with stamp-collecting and science kits. Each night, his mother read to him from classic works of literature.

Religion was also an important part of family life. Orissa Gomes was the organist and choir director at the local, mostly white, Baptist church. After Sunday services, young Peter Gomes often "played church" in the family's basement, redelivering the morning's sermon--"with considerable improvements," according to his mother--at an improvised pulpit made of cranberry boxes.

At the age of twelve, he preached his first sermon in church. "Church is for me what the basketball court is for most black kids: a place where my imagination was unleashed and I was given free rein on a stage," he stated.

Nevertheless, as a teen, Gomes was unsure that he had a religious vocation. Upon graduating in 1961 from Plymouth High School, where he was the president of his class, he enrolled at Bates College, a Baptist institution in Lewiston, Maine, as a history major. He received the Theodore Presser scholarship in music throughout his years at Bates and supplemented it by working as the organist and choirmaster at the First Congregational Church in Lewiston.

In his senior year, Gomes applied to a graduate program at the Winterthur Institute with an eye to becoming a museum curator. Around the same time, however, one of his professors of religion recommended that he spend a year at Harvard Divinity School first.

Gomes graduated from Bates in 1965 and entered the divinity school that fall. Finding the courses stimulating, he remained there for three years, completing his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1968. During his student years at Harvard, he won the preaching prize and was the chairman of both the Worship and Publications committees.

Once Gomes graduated, he was recruited by the Tuskegee Institute to join the faculty as a history instructor and director of the freshman studies program. He also became an assistant in the ministry at the campus chapel.

Gomes was well-liked by the students and enjoyed his work at Tuskegee, where, he stated in 1996, "he would have been happy to stay . . . for the rest of his life," but in 1970 he was invited to return to Harvard as assistant minister of the college's Memorial Chapel. In 1974 he was appointed both Pusey Minister of the Memorial Chapel and Plummer Professor of Christian Morals.

Gomes became an integral part of college life at Harvard. "From Freshman Sunday to the benediction at commencement, his is the first and last official voice that every Harvard student hears, and one of the few whose words will be remembered," wrote Robert Boynton in *The New Yorker* in 1996.

Gomes's preaching and distinctive voice--which Boynton described as "a rich baritone . . . three parts James Earl Jones, one part John Houseman"--earned him attention beyond the Cambridge campus. He was chosen to give the benediction at Ronald Reagan's inauguration in 1985, and he gave a sermon at the Washington National Cathedral as part of the ceremonies surrounding that of Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, in 1989.

Two years later, Harvard became embroiled in controversy when a conservative student magazine, *Peninsula*, devoted 56 pages to articles condemning homosexuality. Most of the undergraduate authors were Roman Catholics.

Immediately after the publication appeared, an openly gay student had a homophobic slur written across his door. A group of gay and lesbian students, incensed by both the magazine articles and the targeting of the gay student, organized a protest to be held in the Harvard Yard and invited Gomes to participate.

He accepted the invitation, and in his speech to those assembled in the Yard, declared that "these wicked writings [i.e., in *Peninsula*] are hurtful, divisive, and most profoundly wrong."

Gomes described the Harvard glbtq community as a "diverse and secular one" and not "as a whole particularly visibly religious." Nevertheless, he assured his audience that "you and I are made in the image of God," and then, to the surprise of everyone, announced, "I am a Christian who happens to be gay."

Gomes's decision to come out publicly as a gay man--and in the place and the way that he did--was not made lightly. "I determined that I would make my best effort to represent my understanding of the Bible and Christian faith as it applied to the heart of the present discontents . . . . I wanted all and sundry, but particularly these young homosexuals and their polemic antagonists, to see that there was more than one way to read the Bible and to understand the imperatives of the Christian faith," he wrote, adding that he "also wanted to win minds and hearts, or at least awaken them, to a view of Christian faith which in dispute valued charity and humility over mean-spiritedness and arrogance."

The protesters in the Harvard Yard greeted Gomes's declaration of his homosexuality first with astonishment and then jubilation. Embracing each other, jumping up and down, and flinging hats in the air, "they looked like the winning team after the World Series," wrote Mary Jordan in the *Washington Post*.

The next day Gomes found "hundreds of notes and bundles of flowers" from grateful Harvard students at the entrance to the parsonage. But, predictably, the opposition mobilized as well: a group calling itself Concerned Christians at Harvard organized to demand Gomes's dismissal and held a candlelight vigil for that cause.

The controversy thrust Gomes into the national spotlight, as both print and broadcast media reported his revelation and the conservative students' reaction to it. The irony was that Gomes was a political conservative himself. Of the invitation to address the rally, he wrote, "I fully appreciated the fact that I

was not asked to speak because of any radical credentials that I may have had: I had none. . . . I was invited to speak as a member of the establishment."

The furor eventually abated, with Gomes still in his Harvard posts.

Although coping with the unwanted attention had been difficult, Gomes stated that he "found this experience to be one of the most formative and rewarding of [his] ministry" and that it "drove [him] to an ever more intense study of both the relevant passages of scripture and the theories of interpretation."

His reflections on the Bible led him to write *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (1996), in which he discusses not only what scripture says--and does not say--about homosexuality but also its messages on race, anti-Semitism, and the role of women in society, as well as the very question of the interpretation of a sacred text in a culture far removed and far different from the one in which it was written, yet that still holds a powerful sway over contemporary society.

In his thoughtful commentary on the biblical texts adduced to condemn homosexuality, Gomes asks the essential question, "When the Bible speaks of homosexuality, does it mean what we mean when we speak of homosexuality?" Analyzing the texts at issue, he demonstrates that it does not.

He points out that "homosexuality is not mentioned in the Ten Commandments, nor in the Summary of the Law. No prophet discourses on the subject. Jesus himself makes no mention of it, and homosexuality does not appear to be of much concern to those early churches with which Saint Paul and his successors were involved."

Furthermore, he notes, the egregious behavior that led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is never specified in the Bible. While "the conventional wisdom is that the city of Sodom was destroyed because its inhabitants practiced homosexuality," that is not in fact what the text says. It is, indeed, silent on that point.

While the Bible may have been silent, commentators have not been. As a result, writes Gomes, "the source [of widely held beliefs about what the Bible says about homosexuality] is not the Bible but the moral assumptions of the Church Fathers with which they read the Bible and interpreted it as part of the teaching tradition of the church." He therefore concludes that "we must change our position on homosexuality if that position is based upon a prejudicial and uninformed reading of scripture."

Gomes neither sought nor expected to become known as "the gay preacher" as a result of coming out; nor did he define himself that way. His interests as a minister and theologian were varied, as reflected in his teaching and his writing. In 2002 he wrote *The Good Life: Truths That Last in Times of Need*, in which he offers readers food for thought as they go on "the search for noble purpose" that will not only make their own lives more fulfilling but also contribute to a better and more just society.

Gomes also published *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (2003), a collection of his sermons on a wide range of topics, including the significance of various days and seasons of the liturgical calendar.

If Gomes did not intend to be "the gay preacher," neither did he shy away from the opportunity that the role presented to him. He used his eloquent voice to speak to and about glbtq people, always with the message of the need for equality.

In a 2004 op-ed piece in the *Boston Globe* on the subject of same-sex marriage, Gomes wrote that if Massachusetts denied gay and lesbian couples the right to wed, "nothing will be done to save marriage, and

yet in the name of doing so, incalculable, retrogressive, and even punitive damage will be done to those of our fellow citizens who under the civil law crave the legitimization of their loving relationships."

He further noted that "the way to the future is always paved by extending, not restricting, liberties, especially to those who heretofore have been excluded. The health of a republic may well be determined by its capacity to adapt itself to the extension of its own privileges and responsibilities to those whom it would be easy by custom or conviction to ignore."

An Honorary Fellow of Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge, England, where the Gomes Lectureship was established in his honor, Gomes received more than 30 honorary degrees. He served as trustee of Bates College and the National Cathedral School, and served as acting director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African-American Research at Harvard.

Gomes died on February 28, 2011 in Boston, the result of complications of a stroke.

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