I’ve been reflecting a great deal lately on the many examples of bullying and oppression that have led to the loss of so many young lives. I’ve looked at articles on the web about ten who were bullied and committed suicide in recent months because they were – or were perceived to be – gay. And I’ve been struck by the strangeness of the events leading up to the suicide of Tyler Clementi – that’s a world and a reaction that was a mystery to me. It’s a sad thing to contemplate such loss of life.

I’ve been at a loss to explain to myself why some people succumb to such bullying, and others find their way through it. I easily agree with the you-tubers who say “it gets better,” and hope that message gets through.

And I was also moved to tears at some recent counts of the extraordinary violence and brutality of the recent Bronx gay-bashing incidents. Perhaps out of self-protection, I had allowed myself to forget that such brutality exists in the world.

I don’t want to forget that Bronx incident, but I do want to focus my reflections tonight on more everyday abuse, kinds that signal the banality of evil, the ordinary forms of hurt that most of us have much greater capacity to participate in, and probably did somehow participate in at some points in our lives.

I know from experience and observation that bullying is the tool of the weak, the insecure, and the fearful. As a social
scientist I’ve observed it in groups and occasionally studied it as a social phenomenon.

It’s often a tool of people whose sense of themselves is low enough that the only way they can figure out how to elevate their status is by finding someone else to put below them. It’s often a tool of people who have been abused themselves.

It is a tool of people who know better than most of us what fear feels like, so they know exactly how and where to zero in on others’ fears and manipulate them.

The persons they go after are often the ones who embody what they are most afraid of being themselves. To the degree that I’m really secure in my own sexual identity, for example, I don’t need to go after someone else. But if I’m insecure, the best defense is a good offense that seems to deflect the fear to others. And in the last several years it should not surprise us to have seen a number of high profile homophobes in politics and religion get unmasked themselves.

Bullying relies on fear. I’ve seen bullies become powerless and impotent when someone simply stands up and says that the fear that’s being played on is ridiculous or not something to be afraid of. It can be like throwing water on the wicked witch of the west.

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At Holy Cross, not unlike many other places, one of the worst fears I’ve observed is the fear of not fitting in, of not being wanted by others. I hear from students about how they’d hate to be seen going to Kimball with no friends to be with. I hear them calling each other on the way down to make sure that doesn’t happen. My sense is that Holy Cross students are in numerous ways particularly generous and welcoming. But they do know fear and are as human as anyone else. We have the capacity to hurt in daily, ordinary ways, but we also have the capacity to throw water on the witch.

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When you walk through the front doors of Kimball several times each day, you see above you the words, “Hospes Venit, Christus Venit.” A good translation is that when you welcome another person – when you show hospitality, you welcome Christ. The bible is full of references to thinking of the other as Christ, and the tradition reaches back further in Judaism with the message that we should always be ready to welcome anyone because he or she might in fact be the messiah.

It’s hard to bully someone when you imagine that the person you are bullying is Christ.

Someone at Holy Cross was wise enough to make sure that you would face those words, “Hospes Venit, Christus Venit” every time you walked into Kimball.
The capacity to overcome bullying or fearmongering or its power over us this can start from another fundamental point of theology as well. When I look at my own experience, there’s no other point that helped me more than this, and no point I want to communicate to you more earnestly.

[look people in the eyes for this]
The theological point is this: We are created by a God who loves us and who loves us wildly – beyond our capacity to love. It’s in Thomas Aquinas and it’s in basic Christian theology. We exist at all because we are loved into being. I don’t mean that only the straight people, or the good people, however you define them, are loved into being. We are all loved into being by a God who knows us. Think of that – a God who knows the worst things you think about yourself, and who still, without hesitation loved you into being, straight or gay or whatever. God loves us all wildly and without qualification.

The Spiritual Exercises, the great tool given to us by St. Ignatius, hopes first and foremost to engender in us an awareness that we are sinners, loved by God. That means that the reason we are loved is not because we are good. It’s not because we deserve it on our own. We’re loved just because that’s what God is like.

If you are the kid out there who is susceptible to so many fears about yourself because of your sexuality, just remember this. God is just wild about you. God is not wild
about your parents’ expectations for you, or your friends’ ideas about what you ought to be. God knit you and made you and is wild about you, not as an instrument but as God’s particular and purposeful creation.

Ignatius knew that if we could really feel and grasp how much we are loved by God, and how gratuitously loved we are, we would find internal freedom from our fears, and be moved to respond more generously. Ignatius never wanted to see us be prisoners of fear.

In my own life, the experience of being loved – feeling it deeply, wholly and radically, from God, from a parent, or from a partner – completely surpasses anything else in life. It’s a game changer.

It may be too much for us to hold on to that feeling of unconditional love all the time and for long. But it’s a thunderbolt to feel what it’s like to be loved fully and unconditionally.

When I’ve known that we are loved fully, wildly and unconditionally nothing else can overcome me. Because love casts out fear.

I hope you wish for each other that everyone finds that love as fully as possible – in God, a parent, or a partner. I wish it for you, and would love to hear about it when you find it. What could be better?