

# A Eulogy for Louie Crew Clay

By Kim Byham

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This is truly a great honor to have an opportunity to share with you a few things about my dear friend, Louie. I was touched when Ernest asked me to do this but he was surprised when I said I would need 45 minutes, both because there is so much to tell and because Louie loved really long sermons – a remnant of his Southern Baptist upbringing. The longest sermon by Louie, or indeed perhaps by anyone in an Episcopal church, occurred two Episcopal churches north of here on Broad Street, at the House of Prayer. It was Pride Sunday in New York and Louie was to ride in a convertible in the march. I was charged with getting Louie into the city on time. His excellent sermon, after 20 minutes, came to an apparent conclusion. But then he began a second sermon, perhaps on another lesson. Again, it was a fine sermon, this time lasting about 15 minutes. I began to panic as the parade car had to leave at a set time. But as he concluded I was confident that we would make it. However, he then began a third sermon, on yet a different topic. Those of you who know the House of Prayer will recall the large pillars in the nave. I moved behind one, but in Louie's view, and started vigorously tapping my watch. He got the message and kept this third sermon to about 6 minutes, after which we immediately left. Ever after that, when Louie and I heard an outstanding sermon, Louie would always say, tongue in cheek, "It was too short."

Most of you knew that Louie was raised a Southern Baptist and perhaps you knew that he was a graduate of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Louie often said it was, and perhaps still is, the largest Baptist university in the world. Today it's known for football and Kenneth Star. What few people know is that Louie, while an undergraduate, became a licensed Baptist minister. And as he proudly said, they never took his license to preach away. Being licensed in the Southern Baptist Church is the first and only step prior to being ordained. It essentially combines the three stages in our church's pre-ordination process.

I'm a cradle Episcopalian but I'm going to take a page from our Baptist brethren and select a text to preach on not from the lectionary. Indeed, it is a hymn, the 14<sup>th</sup> most popular hymn in The Hymnal according to a poll and one that was almost omitted from the current hymnal until there was a flood of protest. Although quintessentially English, the hymn does not appear in the English hymnal. It is in both the Presbyterian and Methodist hymnals but Americanized. Many of you have already guessed that I refer to *I Sing a Song of the Saints of God*, by Lesbia Scott. Lesbia, a Vicar's wife, published the hymn in 1929, but our familiar tune was written a few years later by an Episcopal priest.

I won't ruin it by singing.

I sing a song of the saints of God,  
patient and brave and true,  
who toiled and fought and lived and died  
for the Lord they loved and knew.  
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen, [one was both!]  
and one was a shepherdess on the green;  
they were all of them saints of God, and I mean,  
God helping, to be one too.

They loved their Lord so dear, so dear,  
and his love made them strong;  
and they followed the right for Jesus' sake  
the whole of their good lives long.  
And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,  
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast;  
and there's not any reason, no, not the least,  
why I shouldn't be one too.

It seems to me that Christianity is somewhat vague about the meaning of sainthood. In the early church all members were sometimes called saints, and there is a church in Utah that still refers to its members as saints. Part of the confusion has no doubt been caused by the Roman Catholic Church which, in 993, instituted an elaborate process to prove someone is in heaven and hence a saint. The Orthodox and Anglican churches never adopted this practice, and most Protestants only refer to saints mentioned in the New Testament. Today, the Episcopal calendar is known as "A Great Cloud of Witnesses," an appropriate title because we make no pretense of knowing if

they are already in heaven or simply waiting for the Last Judgement like the rest of us. But we, like our Orthodox and Roman brethren, celebrate All Saints Day to acknowledge all the multitude of saints whose names we don't know who are in heaven.

But I want to talk about the saints among us. Lesbia Scott says:

They lived not only in ages past;  
there are hundreds of thousands still.  
The world is bright with the joyous saints  
who love to do Jesus' will.  
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,  
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea.  
For the saints of God are just folks like me  
and I mean to be one too.

At the risk of over-simplifying, there are at least two kinds of saints among us – saints of the world and, a subset, saints of the Church. Saints of the world include all those whose faith manifests itself in love, compassion, sharing, perhaps to the world or perhaps only to their family or neighbors. A saint of the Church is someone who visibly works to help the Church, Christ's body in the world, live up to its calling.

I have been blessed to know two saints of the church, one slightly and one extremely well. I got to know Desmond Tutu when he served as *locum tenens* at my parish in New York and I was Senior Warden. This was shortly before he received the Nobel Peace Prize. He has done so much for the world, Christ's church and the Anglican Communion.

I am bold to say that Louie's contributions were as important for the world, for Christ's church, and particularly for the Anglican Communion. I was honored to be at General Seminary in 2003 when both Louie and Bishop Tutu were honored at a dinner.

Asked "What makes a saint?" Barbara Brown Taylor, one of our church's great preachers, answered: "Extravagance. Excessive love, flagrant mercy, radical affection,

exorbitant charity, immoderate faith, intemperate hope, inordinate love.” Could there be a better description of Louie?

Most of you here have read Morning Prayer so you know that today the Episcopal Church calendar honors Frederick Douglass. February 20th was chosen for us to gather to remember Louie because it is Ernest’s birthday and Louie would have rejoiced in that choice, but it is striking that it fell on a day our church honors a man who had so much in common with Louie. Both were scholars who loved their churches and accomplished so much despite frustrations. Both were in interracial marriages. Both fought for the rights of more than their own groups. Douglass was a firm believer in dialogue and radical abolitionists criticized his dialogue with slave owners. His response was: "I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong." Louie’s role as co-initiator of the ultimately fruitless 2000 to 2005 dialogue with those who later left our church, known as the New Commandment Task Force, was strikingly similar to Douglass’ efforts. One of Douglas’s early speeches in the post-War South was at Claflin College in South Carolina, an historically black college, where Louie taught before coming to Rutgers.

Louie was born in Anniston, Alabama, and was an only child. His father owned a hardware store. They were not rich but had enough money to send Louie to a prep school, The McCallie School, in Tennessee, where Ted Turner was a couple of years behind him. Then to Baylor and immediately after to Auburn where he got his master’s degree in 1959. The next decade was a time of great transition in his life. He taught at several prep schools, he joined the Episcopal Church, he acted in productions of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, spent a year teaching, touring and going to the theater in England, rode a motorcycle, became an avid jogger, and entered into a short-term marriage, as so many did in those years. In the ‘70s things changed. He went to the University of Alabama and received his Ph.D. in 1971, writing his dissertation on "Dickens' Use of Language for Protest." Thus began a career focused on teaching those whose prior educations had not allowed them to reach their full potential.

Louie met Ernest in 1973. One reason Louie and I were so close were all the things we shared. The most important was our tremendous love for and dependence on our spouses. And both of us met our spouses in Christian institutions. Scott and I met on the steps of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd at General Seminary coming out of Compline. Louie and Ernest met in Atlanta at the YMCA.

Louie and Ernest blessed their relationship in 1974 using the marriage rite in the Book of Common Prayer. Most of you know some of what happened then. They went to San Francisco, Louie on a fellowship, and while there, curious to know if there were get-togethers of lesbian and gay Episcopalians, contacted Grace Cathedral. The laughter and disdain shown by several in the office left Louie incensed and distressed. So, being an outstanding writer, Louie went back to Fort Valley, Georgia, and in the fall of 1974 wrote a newsletter which he distributed as widely as he could.

Contrary to popular belief, and we all use this phrase as shorthand, as did Louie himself, he was not actually the founder of Integrity, the organization. He was founder of a movement. His publication was called *Integrity: Homosexual Episcopal Forum* and soon thereafter, in December 1974, the first Integrity chapter was formed in Chicago. Louie gave his blessing from Georgia and attended the first national Integrity convention which was in Chicago in 1975.

The time had come for change in our church and it came quickly – at first. Integrity was first present at the General Convention in Minneapolis in 1976 when the Episcopal Church famously said “that homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church” and “are entitled to equal protection of the laws with all other citizens, and calls upon our society to see that such protection is provided in actuality.” Louie was not at that General Convention and indeed did not attend one until 1988 in Detroit. He never held an office in Integrity except as newsletter editor from 1974 to 1977, although in the ‘90s he became an *ex-officio* member of the Board.

Louie's activism in the church was not, however, limited to a newsletter. He was the first openly gay person to be published in a number of Christian periodicals, including *The Living Church*. Fort Valley, Georgia was not an easy place for any interracial couple to live, especially a gay one. The parish sent a letter asking Louie to leave the church. The local newspaper reported a schismatic bishop blamed Louie and Ernest when a tornado hit the town. And the Bishop of Atlanta summoned Louie for discipline following his articles appearing. You may never have heard of that happening to a lay person. Louie transferred to an African-American parish where he was welcomed. The Bishop of Atlanta ultimately repented of his actions. But Louie made it his business to visit bishops, particularly in the south, often going from place to place by bus.

I first corresponded with Louie in the mid-70s when I was still in the closet, in the old sense of the term. Ask anyone of a certain age what that meant before it meant publicly declaring oneself LGBTQ. I commended his article in *The Living Church*; after all, I was a good liberal, but I criticized his describing Ernest as his husband. Internalized homophobia convinced me that that meant he was describing himself as the wife. He wrote a firm but kind letter in response. But think, in the mid'70s Louie was using the term husband that took decades to come into general usage in the gay community.

Louie and Ernest moved to friendlier climes if not climates when he began teaching at Wisconsin State University at Stevens Point in 1977. He had previously served on the board of what is now the National LGBTQ Task Force and later the Wisconsin Governor's Council on LGBTQ issues.

He and Ernest then moved to China in 1982 where Louie began teaching at the Beijing International Studies University and later at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This time in China greatly impacted Louie and Ernest. Some of Louie's students were killed in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Louie often wrote under the name Li Min

Hua. He even adopted the Chinese practice of counting Chinese New Year as his birthday so, since he was born in December, he added almost a year to his age. Eventually he dropped that.

After returning to the United States he lived briefly in Chicago, working as a computer programmer. Louie and I first met in September 1987. I had recently become President of Integrity and he and I were both on our way to our first Interim House of Bishops meeting, at a resort in northern Illinois. The Women's Caucus had been attending these meetings for years, but it was a first for Integrity. It was an excellent opportunity to network with supportive bishops and chat with opponents. Indeed, it worked so effectively that until 1993 Integrity was represented at every House of Bishops interim meeting, after which the meetings became closed.

Louie's first time attending a complete General Convention was in 1988 in Detroit. It will surprise you to learn that he spent most of his time in what we called the nerve center on a computer. But he had come to appreciate the value of retail politics. And we all did, as that was the first convention at which deputies came out during debate on the floor. By convention in 1991 in Phoenix he was happily ensconced with Ernest in Newark with a post at Rutgers that seemed to be tailor-made for him, and the support of Bishop Jack Spong. He had met Bishop Spong at the Integrity convention in 1989 at, full circle, Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. General Convention 1991 saw about 15 out-LGBTQ deputies and we saw the first pro-LGBTQ legislation approved since 1976. Of course, then we used the term lesbigay, a term Louie invented. Next year will be the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what was undoubtedly the hottest General Convention in history. It was 115+° outside in Phoenix and hotter inside as the right-wing came to the bitter realization that they were going to lose. And they weren't going to be gracious Episcopalians about it.

Louie began serving on many committees of the Diocese of Newark and on the Vestry of his beloved Grace Church. Louie became a consummate church politician. One of his habits was to go up to every person he encountered at diocesan convention

who had run for office and say, “I voted for you.” This was true, of course, because Newark used the Hare Preferential ballot.

By 1994, the first time he ran for Deputy, he was L1, a distinction I believe he held every time through convention of 2009. I recall vividly that he was L1 in 1994 and I was L4 because our attempt to sit next to each other caused a near melt-down by one of our colleagues. From that point Louie was the unofficial convener of LGBTQ deputies, a caucus that later ceased to meet as we became more numerous. I followed Louie onto the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Newark and followed him by two years as President. Together with our colleagues, but with Louie’s gentle nudging, the Standing Committee took on its canonical responsibility to advise but not always consent.

I also followed Louie by three years on Executive Council where we again worked together on a variety of issues. We spoke virtually every day, often for more than an hour, and that proved invaluable when Louie became co-chair of the episcopal nominating committee to select a successor to Bishop Jack Croneberger. Louie described it as the hardest and most frustrating job he ever had in the church. I was able to commiserate with him because, with the permission of the Standing Committee, of which I was president, I had full knowledge of what the nominating committee was doing and was able to keep the Standing Committee fully informed of the progress being made. And, of course, Louie did a wonderful job of herding cats.

Louie did so much more in and for the Episcopal Church, and, through our church, for other denominations. I commend the various biographies and obituaries which have appeared. Only one accomplishment was omitted both by Louie and others – he was the originator of the concept of the Episcopal Young Adult Service Corp. Like Integrity, Louie didn’t actually play a role in its formation, but he came up with the idea and mentioned it far and wide in the church until it came to fruition.

So as a lawyer I hope I have made a convincing brief for declaring that our dear friend is indeed Saint Louie. The other St. Louis was a king, this one was proudly a quean.

Let's not end without noting what a marvelous poet Louie was. He got me to love poetry, at least when it is spoken. And Louie was for several years the coordinator of the high school writing contest of the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival, which gives New Jersey the most encouraging environment for poetry in the country. So I want to end with parts of the famous poem by Anglican priest John Donne:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; ...  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.