

# The Gay Rabbi and My Mother's Funeral

Few things are more intimate than a graveside funeral service attended by a handful of family members and friends, and if I were homophobic, I would have been mortified at the news that the rabbi presiding at the ceremony was openly gay. The truth is I welcomed him warmly (knowing exactly who he was), and he in turn welcomed me warmly (knowing exactly who I am). In fact, he is a regular listener to my radio broadcast, and I'm writing this article with his full permission and encouragement.

You see, it really is possible to love your gay neighbor as yourself while at the same time opposing the goals of gay activism, and it really is possible to recognize every human being is created in the image of God (yet fallen) while at the same time having massive differences on religious, cultural and moral issues.

In the case of my precious mom's funeral, I was told by the local funeral director that there could be a potential issue with the Jewish cemetery in New Jersey where my mother would be buried because I am a well-known Messianic Jewish leader (Messianic Jews are Jews who believe Jesus is the Messiah). There was also the issue of having a rabbi perform the funeral ceremony, since my sister and her son, who would also be attending, were not believers in Jesus. Would the rabbi have a problem with my participation?

After meeting with the funeral director in North Carolina (where my mother passed away), I heard from the rabbi, who is Reform (the largest and most liberal branch of Judaism in America). He wanted me to know he had no problem with interfaith services, and he assured the cemetery things would be fine. He also wanted me to know—to my absolute

surprise—that he was a regular listener to my radio show. How extraordinary!

I, for my part, told him to focus on my sister and her son in terms of the ceremony, since he was there especially for them, while I would concentrate on giving the eulogy. I also said he need not be concerned about offending me in any way.

When we finished our talk, I got online to see if I could find out more about him and, again to my absolute surprise, I learned that he was an out and proud gay rabbi who strongly advocated LGBT-affirming synagogues.

I immediately texted him to let him know I had read about him online and it appeared that our lives intersected in yet another unexpected way, making me all the more eager to meet him.

You might say, “But that’s outrageous! How could you let a gay rabbi officiate at something as sacred as your mother’s funeral service?”

Actually, the rabbi was there at the request of my sister and her son; so in that respect, the ceremony was for them. But from my perspective, it was altogether fitting that, on the day of my mother’s burial, I would be standing side by side with an openly gay rabbi and we would be treating each other with kindness and respect.

You say, “But don’t you believe what the Torah says about homosexual practice?”

Yes, I certainly do, without apology, and the rabbi, Bill Kraus, is fully aware of my position. Yet he, for his part, was quite willing to perform the ceremony for my mother, even though some rabbis once branded me Public Enemy No. 1 because of my Jewish outreach work, and some gay activists have branded me one of the nation’s “most vicious homophobes.”

The reality is that I am not a Reform Jew, and the rabbi is not a Messianic Jew. What brought us together last week was our shared humanity, our shared (albeit very different) Jewish heritages and our commitment to honor the memory of the dead, he as a hospice and cemetery rabbi and I as a grieving son.

I truly believe all this was ordained by God rather than coincidental, and from my perspective, it illustrated what I have said for years: My profound opposition to LGBT activism is biblical, not personal, and I truly do care about those whose agenda I resist and whose "marriages" I do not recognize.

That's why I often recount that my first organ teacher, when I was just seven years old, was an openly gay man named Russ. He would often come to our house with his partner, Ed, a hairdresser. After Russ taught my sister and me, they would stay for dinner, and Ed would do my sister's hair.

These are distinct childhood memories, and this reflects the openness with which our parents raised us. My faith in Jesus and my belief in the authority of God's Word has only deepened my love for those who identify as LGBT, and only God knows the holy tension I live with in following the mandate to "reach out and resist," meaning to reach out to the LGBT community with compassion while resisting their agenda with courage.

As for Rabbi Kraus, my greatest desire is that he comes to recognize Jesus as our Messiah, and I imagine one of his greatest desires would be to introduce me to his "husband" so as to lovingly challenge my views of gay couples.

In any event, the funeral service was meaningful to both of us in that it provided an unexpected opportunity in a most personal, painful setting to demonstrate that, while we can be ideological opponents with deeply entrenched values, we are even more deeply committed to treating each other with kindness and respect, seeking to win over the other with a

message of truth and love.

That's why we have been texting each other since the funeral. That's why Rabbi Kraus was kind enough to check on my daughter Megan and me to be sure we arrived safely home (she traveled with me to New Jersey for the funeral) and that's why he assured me his comments to friends and colleagues about me were as respectful of my comments about him (he heard me speak about him on the radio after the funeral).

In that spirit, then, may I suggest a prayer you could pray for both the rabbi and me? It would simply be, "God, bring these men into your very best plan for their lives, whatever that plan might be. Where either one is following the truth, affirm him, and where either one is following error, correct him." I warmly welcome that prayer and believe Rabbi Kraus would as well.

As for those who think I'm going soft on LGBT issues, it would appear they have not heard a single word I've said for the last 10-plus years. (The same would apply to my LGBT critics who would be shocked to read this article.) I do what I do because I seek to love God with all my heart and love my neighbor as myself. That's why I take the stands I take, and that's why I care deeply about Rabbi Kraus and his gay friends and colleagues.

Thank you in advance for praying that prayer for us. {eoa}