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Between the Boy and the Bridge — A Haunting Question

I am haunted by the one question that seems so obvious and clear in the account of Tyler Clementi's tragic death. In those days of crushing anguish, humiliation, and confusion, was there no one who could have stood between that boy and that bridge?

Monday, October 4, 2010

By all accounts Tyler Clementi was an 18-year-old young man who was excited to be a freshman in college, gifted as a violinist, and looking forward to the future. All that changed last week when he walked out onto the massive George Washington Bridge that connects New York with New Jersey and jumped 200 feet to his death.

The last few days of Tyler Clementi's life were a cauldron of confusions. Over the course of three days, he learned that his roommate at Rutgers University, also age 18, had surreptitiously turned a webcam toward his bed, filming him in a romantic encounter with another male student. The roommate employed social media to inform friends of the event, turning what Tyler Clementi assumed was a private moment into a devastating public disclosure.

It is now clear that Tyler was crushed, confused, and angry. He posted thoughts about how he might respond on the Web and finally wrote this on his Facebook page: "Jumping off gw bridge sorry."



In September, no less than three additional teenagers committed suicide, and these are believed also to be connected to disclosures or struggles with homosexuality. As Geoff Mulvihill and Samantha Henry of the Associated Press report:

Clementi's death was part of a string of suicides last month involving youngsters who were believed to have been victims of anti-gay bullying. Fifteen-year-old Billy Lucas hanged himself in a barn in Greensburg, Ind. Asher Brown, 13, shot himself in the head in Houston. And 13-year-old Seth Walsh of Tehachapi, Calif. hanged himself from a tree in his back yard.

That is four teenagers in just one month. And look at those ages. Two were only 13, one was 15, and Tyler Clementi was 18. That is four dead boys in the space of one horrible month, and all were struggling with sexual identity.

The gay rights movement was fast to claim that Tyler Clementi was a victim of gay bullying. While the motive of his roommate and accomplices is not known, the undeniable result was that Tyler was exposed before the world through the power of social media — in this case a very dangerous power indeed.

He was humiliated, angry, and horribly confused. His confusion is evident in his Internet musings, in which he swings in mood from outright indignation to the reflection that, other than this incident, his roommate was basically decent.

Somewhere in the midst of his heartbreak and confusion, Tyler decided to end his life. He posted his announcement on his Facebook page and headed for the George Washington Bridge. There, he ended his short life with a long plunge into the Hudson River.

Reading the news accounts of Tyler's final days and final act is truly horrifying. He was betrayed by classmates and exposed to the world. At the age of 18, it was simply too much for him to bear. A young man who probably never

considered suicide in the past, and who might never have considered it again in the future, felt himself pushed on that day beyond his emotional limits, so he pushed himself off the bridge.

Tyler joined Billy, Seth, and Asher as tragic evidence of the dangerous intersection of sexual confusion, hateful classmates, and the wide-open world of social media. These boys simply ran out of the emotional ability to face life, crushed by the burden of secrets and the bullying of their peers.

The homosexual community will argue that these boys were oppressed by the fact that so many believe that homosexuality is sinful. They respond with calls for the acceptance and normalization of homosexuality. Their logic is easy to understand. If the stigma attached to homosexuality were to disappear, persons who are convinced that they are homosexual in sexual orientation, along with those who are confused, would be free from bullying, the threat of exposure, and injury to their parents and loved ones.

Of course, Christians committed to biblical truth will recognize this as a demand to lie to sinners about their sin. The church cannot change its understanding of the sinfulness of homosexual acts unless it willfully disobeys the Scripture and rejects the authority of the Bible to reveal the truth about sin and sinfulness.

In other words, the believing church cannot surrender to the demand that we disobey and reject biblical truth. That much is clear. We cannot lie to persons about the sinfulness of their sin, nor comfort them with falsehood about their moral accountability before God. The rush of the liberal churches and denominations to normalize homosexuality is now a hallmark of their disobedience to the Bible.

But this is not the end of the matter, and we know it. When gay activists accuse conservative Christians of homophobia, they are wrong. Our concern about the sinfulness of homosexuality is not rooted in fear, but in faithfulness to the Bible — and faithfulness means telling the truth.

Yet, when gay activists accuse conservative Christians of homophobia, they are also right. Much of our response to homosexuality is rooted in ignorance and fear. We speak of homosexuals as a particular class of especially depraved sinners and we lie about how homosexuals experience their own struggle. Far too many evangelical pastors talk about sexual orientation with a crude dismissal or with glib assurances that gay persons simply choose to be gay. While most evangelicals know that the Bible condemns homosexuality, far too many find comfort in their own moralism, consigning homosexuals to a theological or moral category all their own.

What if Tyler Clementi had been in your church? Would he have heard biblical truth presented in a context of humble truth-telling and gospel urgency, or would he have heard irresponsible slander, sarcastic jabs, and moralistic self-congratulation? What about Asher and Billy and Seth?

The teenage years are hard enough to navigate. Most boys do not struggle with homosexuality, but there is not a teenage boy alive who does not struggle with sexual confusion. There is no deacon, preacher, or pew-sitter who went through male adolescence unscathed and without sin. There is not a human being who reaches school age who would not be humiliated by a well-placed webcam. And yet these boys — along with girls facing similar struggles — imagine themselves to be alone in their confusion and helpless in their anguish.

Was there no one to step between Tyler Clementi and that bridge? Was there no friend, classmate, or trusted adult who had the courage and compassion to reach into his life and offer hope? Was there no one who could tell him that the anguish of his moment would not last for his lifetime? Was there no one to put into perspective the fact that people who did not love him had taken advantage of him, but that the many who did love him would love him no less?

We can only look at this news account and grieve. As Christians, we just have to wonder. Was there no believer to befriend Tyler and, without loving his homosexuality, love *him*? The homosexual community insists that to love someone is to love their sexual orientation. We know this to be a lie. But no one who loves me should love nor rationalize *my* sin. The church must be the people who speak honestly about sin because we have first learned by God's grace to speak honestly of our own.

Something has gone horribly wrong when four young boys take their lives in the space of one month, and a society just goes on with its business. There are grieving parents and loved ones who will never get over that month, and there

were four young men who did not survive it.

There are Tylers and Ashers and Billys and Seths all around us. They are in our schools, in our neighborhoods, in our churches . . . and in our homes. They, like us, desperately need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to know the grace of God toward sinners. They, like us, need to know the mercy of God extended to sinners through Christ Jesus. They, like us, need to repent of their sins and learn by grace how to grow into faithfulness. They, like us, need to know that they are loved if they are going to trust Christians to tell them about Jesus.

Even long before they may hear or respond to the gospel, they need to know that they are loved and cherished for who they are. They need to know that we stand between them and those who would harm them. They need to know that we know how to love sinners because we have been loved despite our own sin.

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I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

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