

**Clackamas United Church of Christ**  
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### **Strippers Will Lead Us Into the Kingdom: Fighting for #OURKIDS in Mississippi**

Our Old Testament and New Testament readings today begin with the exact same phrase: Do not be afraid.

God tells Abraham to not be afraid and Jesus tells his followers to not be afraid.

When I first read these passages last week, my initial reaction was, “Easy for you to say.”

After all, neither Abraham nor Jesus lived in the 21st century United States of America. As you know, the list of things we could fear grows bigger by the day. I’ll name just a few - We live in an America where there have been 297 mass shootings so far this year, and it’s only August; where the hateful ideology of racist white supremacy is growing; where the president claims that brown refugee mothers and their children are dangerous invaders coming to destroy our way of life; where just this last week ICE raided food plants and detained nearly 700 workers, tragically separating elementary school children from their parents.

Immigrants come to the US for many reasons. One reason is for employment. ICE is creating fear among our Latinx neighbors. But why is our government only going after brown skinned workers? After all, these immigrants are economically and racially vulnerable. Why isn’t our government going after the employers who hire undocumented immigrants? After the raids last week, a federal court found that employers at 6 of the 7 food plants that were raided last week (quote) “[willfully and unlawfully](#)” hired undocumented immigrants.

I don’t want our government to go after anyone in this situation. But if our government really cared about undocumented immigrants working in the US, it would go after employers who illegally hire. But our government is not doing that. Why? Because it is so much easier to scapegoat brown people and their little children who are in every way the most vulnerable category of people in our society.

The fact is that a large portion our economy depends upon undocumented immigrant labor. And so undocumented immigrants are put in a double bind. Our economy tells undocumented immigrants to please come. But when they come, many of our leaders scapegoat them as the greatest threat to our nation. This is an evil within our government and our society. We need to name it for what it is.

We have a cruel government whose intentionally cruel policies are meant to stoke fear.

But Jesus knew fear, too. He lived in the Roman Empire, a land controlled by violent kings and emperors who were also cruel. The threat of political violence terrorized Jesus and his people. And as we know, the Roman political authorities and the religious authorities conspired to murder Jesus and most of his disciples.

Jesus knew violence and he knew fear. He knew that a thief could come and take away all of our possessions and even our lives. But he also knew that there was more to life than fear.

But here is the most important thing that want you to hear today: Jesus says, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

According to Jesus, the politics of the Kingdom of God is based on giving. It’s based on generosity. It is God’s “good pleasure” to give you the kingdom.

This is a radical view of God. Most Americans don’t believe in a God of generosity and “pleasure.” Rather, I’m afraid most Americans believe in the old man in the sky, who is a Judge that counts our sins so we better behave or we will be sent to hell. This God is not a God of pleasure. It is a God of fear.

The god of fear is an idol. Tragically, it’s the idolatrous god of American theology. It’s the false god of absolute power and judgment that leads many Americans to support cruel government policies like those we saw this last week. I’m here to say that this god of American theology has nothing to do with Jesus because Jesus comes to us and says, “You don’t have to fear God. For it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

According to Jesus, God is not like a Judge that you have to fear. Jesus flips that idea upside down and changes our understanding of God.

In our passage today, Jesus says God is like the master of a house. The master leaves the house on a long journey for a wedding party. The master’s servants get to work, preparing a feast for the master when he returns home. When the master returns the servants expect him to sit so they can serve him. But then comes the radical flip, according to Jesus, the Master tightens his belt, instructs his servants sit at the table, and the Master serves the servants.

Jesus reveals that we don’t have to fear God because is not some judgmental figure in the sky. God is love. God generously loves all people just as we are and so there is no need to fear.

And yet the truth is that there is so much fear and anxiety in our world. That fear stems largely from individuals and government officials who act with violence and hatred in the name of white supremacy and systemic racism.

And there are times when I fall into despair. It has been a rough few weeks with many low points. The ICE raids that left parents and children traumatized for the rest of their lives is just one example among many.

To make matters worse, there are Christians who say that we shouldn’t do anything about the violence spreading in our culture except for offer thoughts and prayers. There are Christians who say that God approves of ICE’s cruelty of breaking up families and traumatizing children.

Well, I tell you this, the God of Jesus doesn't approve of cruel political policies. The God of Jesus is serving up a party and everyone is invited. It is God's good pleasure to generously serve everyone, including undocumented immigrants and brown people and black people and white people and poor people and gay people and transgender people. It is God's good pleasure to dismantle the systematic ways that the United States government divides people up into us and them. It is God's good pleasure to invite us to generously love one another, because in the end there is no us and them, there is no documented and undocumented. As [St. Paul](#) said 2,000 years ago, there is no Jew or Gentile, male and female, slave or free. Because under Jesus, in the end there is only us. What if the United States actually believed in the God of Jesus?

Yet, I felt despair after the ICE raids last week. I felt like there was nothing I could do against the massive machinery that is the overtly white supremacist government and theology that infects much of the United States. Much within our "Christian nation" has fallen so far from anything that looks like Jesus. But then I got a direct message on our church's facebook page that gave me hope.

The message came from a woman who routinely sends us encouraging comments. She has even donated money to our church. And, this is the best part, she is a stripper living in Portland.

She told me that she and her stripper friends wanted to start a fundraiser to help the children who were separated from their families by ICE in Mississippi. She wanted to identify the fundraiser with the hashtag #ourkids because she says that we need to treat every child, including undocumented children, as if they are our children. Because in reality, they are our children, too.

And so I said to this stripper, "What can my church do to help?"

Her first reaction was concern. She feared that our church might get backlash if we became known as the church that worked with strippers.

And do you know what I said? Bring on the backlash.

Because Jesus tells us to not be afraid.

Jesus was once confronted by some of his opponents, who were the religious elite. His opponents moralistically divided the world into good guys and bad guys, those who were included and those who were excluded, those who deserved the Father's good pleasure and who didn't.

[Jesus said](#) to the religious elite, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

Notice that Jesus doesn't say that his opponents will never enter the Kingdom of God. They will eventually make it, but their judgmentalism, hatred, and hostility toward others meant that they couldn't enter first. They had to wait because the tax collectors and prostitutes would go in first. Jesus once again flips our expectations upside down by saying that prostitutes would lead the way into the Kingdom of God.

And this last week, strippers led me into the kingdom of God. They gave me hope. They give us hope. And I thank God for them.

Because right at the moment when we feel despair and we think the white supremacist machinery is too big, we find out that people from all walks of life care about the same things that we care about. Strippers refuse to let evil government policies have the last word. And I say amen! Sign me up!

And so on Friday I did something I never thought I would do. I brainstormed with a stripper about how Clackamas United Church of Christ and her strip club could work together on a campaign to help these children.

Here's the mission statement our stripper friends came up with:

"We will stand together, we sinners and saints, for something so much bigger than hate."

Indeed, we are rising together for something so much bigger than hate. During the next few weeks we will learn more about how we can help the children in Mississippi as we work together with our new stripper friends.

Here's the thing: our vulnerable undocumented neighbors might need to be afraid. But Jesus calls me to not be afraid. I am a white, heterosexual, cisgender, economically privileged male. I can take some risks. When Jesus says, "Don't be afraid," he's talking to me. We don't need to be afraid of taking some risks. We don't need to be afraid of what our neighbors might think. We don't need to be afraid of what moralistic Christians might think. We don't need to be afraid because every time we do something a little out of our comfort zone, you all say, "Let's be brave."

Friends, when I first came to CUCC, you told me that we are a small but mighty church. Well, we aren't so small anymore. And we are even more mighty. When the world is falling apart, we are called to do mighty things. In a time when the world needs Christians to act big, let us not act small. Let us act big and without fear.

It's time to work with whomever we can so that together we can resist the powers of evil and indifference running throughout our nation.

Friends, I never thought I would preach a sermon like this, but I'm so glad I am. We are not alone in our work. People throughout our nation are concerned about the same things that concern us. Thank God strippers are concerned, too. As Jesus said, they are leading the way into the Kingdom of God. May we follow when we are called to follow. May we lead when we are called to lead. And may we continue to work for a more just and loving world. Amen.