

Sunday, October 11, 2020

Sermon: The Case for Christian Atheism & National Coming Out Day

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Jesus tells a parable about a king who throws a party. But there's a problem. Nobody comes! And what does the king do in response? He burns down the whole town. Ouch.

Throughout the centuries, many Christians have interpreted this parable as a story of divine judgment. If you reject God's party, God will act like the king and reject you. But is that really what Jesus is saying in this parable? If so, I personally would rather be an atheist than believe in such a vindictive God. In light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, I think there is a better way to understand this parable. I look forward to exploring it with you today.

It's also National Coming Out Day! Today we will proclaim the belovedness of our LGBTQIA siblings. Thank God for those of us who are LGBTQIA!

As Larry said earlier when he was talking about his coming-out story, he was attending various churches. Larry said that many of those churches talked about our LGBTQ siblings, but it didn't sound like Jesus. This is so important when we are dealing with difficult passages in scripture and also violent times during church history and during church present. Larry brings up one of the most crucial questions that we can ever ask as Christians. Does this look like Jesus? I think if we're being honest with each other, if I'm being honest with you, there are times when I have not acted like Jesus. There are times when I have failed to love my neighbor as I love myself. There are times when we have done things that actually look like Jesus. So we are a mixture of good and bad things, good and bad actions, and good and bad thoughts. They exist within us all, they are human. But when it comes to reading scripture and understanding who God is, Larry brings up the most important point. Does this look like Jesus?

What we look for in life, what we are looking at is so crucial because we can miss things that are right in front of us. I want to bring up a video that you may have seen. My children saw it, but it is a psychological experiment that relates to this point. This video is the monkey business illusion and less than two minutes long. The video is all about what it is that we are looking for in the world. While watching the video, count how many times the players wearing white passed the ball to another player. The correct answer is 16 passes. Did you spot the gorilla?

For people who haven't seen or heard about a video like this before, about half missed seeing the gorilla. If you knew about the gorilla, you probably saw it, but did you notice the curtain changing color or the player on the black team leaving the game? Let's rewind and watch it again. Here comes the gorilla and there goes a player and the curtain is changing from red to gold. When you're looking for a gorilla, you often miss other unexpected events. That's what the monkey business is about.

Have you seen this experiment before? In London, they had a commercial where they had the gorilla walking through and a bunch of people passing the basketball and they had you count. The first time I saw it I didn't see the gorilla walking through at all, but then when they explained the experiment, I could not un-see the gorilla. I always knew the gorilla was coming through. I'm going to see the gorilla going through and so they were passing the ball back and forth and I thought there's the gorilla, but I totally missed the curtain

changing in the background. This gigantic curtain, the biggest thing in the video, is right there and it's changing colors and I totally missed it because I was looking for the gorilla. This I think is key for how we look at God. In the world as Larry says, sometimes the church doesn't look like Jesus, especially when it's anti-LGBTQ. And sometimes, these parables that Jesus tells don't look like Jesus. Sometimes, these parables, like this parable today that we read earlier, is traditionally titled "The Wedding Banquet" (Matthew 22:1-14). Jesus talks a lot about weddings and inviting people to a wedding, in fact, the Kingdom of God is like a giant wedding feast where everybody is welcomed to the table. We celebrate that on the first Sunday of every month during communion, but as the parable today continues to tell the story, I think Jesus is getting at something different. I think if our mind frame is set on seeing the gorilla or seeing that God is the King character in this parable, that we are going to miss where God actually is in this parable.

I think that when Jesus says in his parables that the Kingdom of God can be compared to this, it's our job to look for Jesus in the parable. What looks like Jesus. What doesn't look like Jesus. And as he continues this parable, he talks about a King who invites people to his son's wedding feast, so far so good, right? But some of the people that the King invites don't come to the party. So how does the king respond? The King responds with revenge. The people who don't come to the party end up not only saying no, I don't want to go to your party, but they do bad things even kill some of the King's servants, and how does the King respond? With massive acts of revenge.

As somebody who lives in Portland, I can tell you about a political leader who sends his troops to cities to try to burn them down, to send tear gas, chemical weapons against those of us living in Portland. That is not something that God would do. It's not something Jesus would do. So when you're in these parables, Larry's question is exactly the one you gotta ask. Does Jesus live his life in a way where you respond with violence, hostility, and hatred, with more violence, hostility, and hatred? That's not how Jesus acts. In his life, he invites us and he himself enters into those situations to try to transform them. Jesus calls us to a life of non-violence. To a life that is the direct opposite of how this King behaves. In fact, this King behaves a lot like King Herod. A lot like the emperors of Rome and not a lot like Jesus.

Jesus is a different kind of King. One who leads us into a realm of love and compassion for all people, including those that we call our enemies. Pray for those you call your enemies. Pray for those who might wish you harm. And at the same time, take care of yourself. And at the same time, work for a more just world. That is how this parable continues on, because after the King destroys this city, I mean, he just burns down the city killing the men, the women, the children, the innocent, and the not innocent. That's not what Jesus is like.

So the parable continues, and Jesus says that he invites everybody into his party. The good and the bad go into the streets and invite everyone into the party. Well, what are you going to say if you know that this King has just murdered the people who didn't go to his party? Of course, you're gonna go. This is not a King that's based on love and compassion. It's a tyrant King. This is a King who wants a bunch of people at his party so that he can have the photo op and say - look how many people love me! Yeah, it's not because they love you, it's because they're intimidated by you. That's why. And so all of these people go to the party and there happens to be one person who didn't quite dress the way that this person was supposed to dress. Wasn't wearing the correct wedding robe, the correct attire. Wasn't playing by the rules and so what does this King do? He tells his servants to bind this person's hands and fists and send them outside the city where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This person shows up to the wedding feast and the King asks - why aren't you wearing your robe? And this person is silent, living in fear. Of course this person is living in fear because

this King has just acted with all kinds of tyranny. This King acts with fascism. If you're not on this King's side then this King is going to be against you and throw you out to your death.

Is that what Jesus is like? No. Jesus enters into a world and he refuses to play by the rules of the religious authorities. He refuses to wear the wedding garment that the religious authorities want him to wear. He refuses to play by the rules and what happens to him? The religious elite kick him out. The religious and the political elite treat Jesus like this person at the end of this parable. If there is a Jesus figure in this parable it is the person at the end who refuses to play by the rules of this culture. What happens to him? He gets kicked out and he gets murdered for it. That's the Jesus in this parable. And on this Sunday where we celebrate our LGBTQIA, on this National Coming Out Sunday, I want to be very clear about this parable. Jesus is in this parable - our LGBTQIA sibling.

It continues to be the tragic fact that in the year 2020, churches, including churches here in Portland, continue to proclaim that our LGBTQIA siblings are somehow deficient, are somehow not made in the image of God, are somehow living in sin, are somehow living a lifestyle that goes against the will of God. Do you know what is a lifestyle that goes against the will of God? It's accusing our LGBTQ siblings of living in sin - that is the sin that the church needs to repent of.

I'm a progressive Christian pastor. People say I don't talk about repentance. I do, and the church needs to repent of the 20, 30, 50, 60, the last 100 plus years of how we have demeaned, marginalized, even as one of our folks prayed, killed, lynched our LGBTQ siblings. Jesus is gay. Jesus is lesbian. Jesus is intersect. Jesus is transgender. That's what this parable is telling us. And so the church needs to stop being one of the last places in our world, and certainly in the United States, that says that it's okay to discriminate against our LGBTQIA siblings. It is not okay. That is not a Christian virtue.

Jesus stands, rises and is there with our LGBTQIA siblings. So on this National Coming Out Day, we here at Clackamas UCC proclaim the truth that God loves all of God's children, including, and especially our LGBTQIA siblings. So friends, let us live into the realm of God where all people are invited to the party, where if you say no to God, God is going to continue to say yes to you because that is who God is. And if we want to say that God says no, that God responds to violence with God's own divine violence like we have in the United States with manifest destiny, with marginalizing our indigenous siblings. If we are going to continue to use Christianity to marginalize our LGBTQIA siblings, if we're going to continue to use Christianity with white supremacy, then I say I would rather be an atheist. I would rather have nothing to do with that God. Let's be atheists instead of worshiping that violent, vengeful God. But thank God that Christians have Jesus. Because, as Larry said, the Jesus that we know, that Jesus revealed through the gospels looks nothing like the Jesus of manifest destiny. Looks nothing like the Jesus of white supremacy. Looks nothing like the Jesus who is against our LGBTQIA siblings because Jesus is not against our LGBTQIA siblings. Jesus is for our LGBTQIA siblings. That is the world that I want to live into. That is the world with the God that I believe in. That is the God that is revealed to us through our brother, our Christ Jesus, and I say thank God for that!

So friends, let us continue to live into God's realm of love and peace and joy and justice for all people. Amen