

**Sunday, November 15, 2020**

**Sermon: Transgender Awareness Week - Jesus Subverts Oppressive Systems**

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**Clackamas United Church of Christ**

*Today begins the Transgender Week of Awareness. I am so grateful to be at a church that welcomes, loves, and accepts our transgender siblings in all of their God-given glory. So this Sunday we will celebrate God's love for all people, but most especially for those of us who are transgender. There is an ancient Christian tradition that claims that members of the church make up the Body of Christ. I am proud to say that the Body of Christ here at Clackamas UCC is transgender, is female, is male, and is beyond all of our gender categories. How could a Christian pastor welcome transgender people into the church? Easy. Jesus. Somebody give me an amen!*

Friends, every so often I think it's important for me to tell you about the principles that I live by, or I try to live by, I often fail. But the principles that I try to keep in front of me as a Christian, and if these principles work for you, I invite you to take them on if you would like. But this for me is an important thing to do because Jesus did this too and as a Christian, and maybe more importantly as somebody who tries to follow Christ, often failing, but as somebody who tries to follow Christ I think it's also important to follow Christ in the way that Jesus read the Bible.

Jesus is our teacher, our rabbi, the one who teaches us how to interpret everything in life including scripture. And this comes down to one very simple passage that we had last month where some of Jesus's opponents come to him and say – hey, Jesus what is the most important commandment? And notice how Jesus doesn't say to them – all of the commandments are equally important. He doesn't say that. He says the most important commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor and, in fact, the way that you love God is by loving your neighbor. And the way that you love your neighbor is by loving God. According to Jesus, this is what it all boils down to.

Later on, in the new testament, some of Jesus's followers write letters and there's this letter called First John. In First John, we see the two true statements about God in all of the new testament. This is where we find statements that say God is 'something.' And what First John says is that we learned who God is from Jesus. And Jesus taught us that God is love. And, a little later on, First John says – God is light and in God there is no darkness at all. What does this mean? It means that God is love. It means that all of the things that we have been taught about God like maybe there's some kind of hatred inside of God, or you have to be a certain way or live a certain way in order for God to love you. All of those teachings that we have been taught are false just like Sander mentioned earlier. Sander was taught very early in his life that he had to be a certain way in order for God to love him. That's not love. Love can often get manipulated, especially on the human level, so when we're talking about God's love for us, it's a free gift given to everyone. And for it to truly be a gift it means that there are no strings attached.

God does not say – I give you this gift of love but you can only keep it if you believe certain things about me, or if you act a certain way, or if you change everything about your identity to conform with what other people are telling you. That's not a gift of love, that's manipulation and I'm preaching to myself here because I often confuse love with manipulation. That is not a gift. That is not divine love. That's love in the human realm.

Christmas is coming up and we're going to be giving people gifts, hopefully. And hopefully, they will be true gifts and if it is a true gift then there are no strings attached. If it is a true gift then you won't even expect a thank you card back. Do you ever get to this point when you give a gift to someone and you start thinking – oh my goodness they didn't even give me a thank you card? That's not a gift. That's not a God-like gift. That's not a God-like love. That's expecting something in return. God's love isn't like that. God's love always comes to us as a gift. Here's what love is – it's not based on a feeling. Love is based on action. The classical Christian definition of love is this – acting for the good of the other, for the other's sake.

Love, for Jesus and for the Hebrew scriptures, the Jewish tradition that formed Jesus, love is an action. It works for the good of the other, for the other. Notice how love can start to be a transaction when you say something like – I'll scratch your back, but only if you scratch my back in return. That's not Christian love that we're talking about. Christian love is – I'm gonna scratch your back because I love you because I care for you. That's what God's love is like. And so, before we get into this parable I wanted to put that before you. Because this parable can be interpreted in really dangerous ways. This parable has been interpreted by folks who are under the influence of something called the prosperity gospel, so people like that will say – if you give the church all of your money, then God will bless you with more talents and give you money back. So give us your money.

Well, guess what? We're not that kind of church. We're not going to say that to you. God is going to bless you. God wants to bless you. God wants to love you and you don't have to give money to any church in order for God to do that. You can still give us money, of course (haha!), but I want it to be out of a sense of love and not out of a sense of obligation or feeling guilty. But out of a sense of – oh my goodness this church is pointing to something about God that needs to be heard. And so, out of a sense of love and compassion, I'm gonna show up Sunday after Sunday and I'm going to donate to this church what I can. That's the offering message that I want to give out of a sense of joy.

In this passage, there are a few things that are happening that should give us some clues. There's a man who comes into this place and then he leaves. We typically think of this man as the 'God character,' but here are some clues. Does God act like that? Does God come into our lives, go on a journey, then leave and come back later? Is that really who God is? No. God is the one who comes to us in Jesus to show us that God is eternally present with us. God is not someone who goes on a journey and stops and then leaves and then comes back. That's our first clue. God is not somewhere way out there and might come back later. God is always radically present with us even after Jesus is resurrected. Jesus says to his disciples – I will be with you until the end of the age. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is with us. God doesn't go on vacation and leave us alone. God is with us at all times.

Then, later on, it says that the man gives talents to certain people, large sums of money. It's almost as if this is a gift at the beginning. It's almost as if he says – here you go, do with it what you will. If that was all the story said then I would say yes, this is a God character. This is the God character, who gives out of God's abundance and expects nothing in return and just wants you to have fun with the talents and do what you can do with the talents. Maybe use them in a way that can make the world a better place.

Later on when we discovered that's not what this man ends up doing. This man who comes and gives some money, and leaves, and then comes back, expects without even saying it, without making this expectation known, expects that you give money back to this man. This man gives but is expecting interest in return. Now, who in the ancient world during Jesus's time goes through lands on a journey and then comes back and expects money in return? What entity in the ancient Jewish world had that capability? It was the Roman Empire. The man who comes through and gives money and there are strings attached. That's the Roman Empire. And you had better use the Roman Empire's money in a way that makes Rome more money so that Rome can go conquer more lands. And if you don't, there are going to be consequences.

Now during Jesus's time, some people played the Roman game. King Herod got a lot of money from Rome to create buildings for Rome. To give glory to Rome. To give back to Rome. And King Herod played that game. Many of the religious leaders during this time also played Rome's game. They accepted money from Rome in order to give money back to Rome so that Rome would keep them in power. But how do you think they made the money that Rome gave them?

How do you think they made more money off of that money? It's not like they were playing the stock market, right? The only way that you could make massive amounts of money during this time was through fraud. Was by stealing money from the peasants from those who were on the margins. From people just like Jesus. And so the third servant

refuses to play that economic game. Refuses to play the game of Rome where I will give you money, but I'm gonna expect money in return. Why does the third servant refuse to play that game? Because the third servant knows that Rome reaps where it didn't sow. Rome steals money. The economic system that dominated Jesus's time stole money from the poor so that those who had power so that those who were rich could get even richer. Here's what I mean. It says that all those who have more will be given and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. That's the ancient Jewish way of saying the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. And Jesus is here and he doesn't play that game. He doesn't give in to that oppressive system. And the third servant says – I knew you were a harsh man. And if the man came back and said – I'm not harsh, I was just here to give you money and to help you and to love you. Then I would say that the third servant didn't understand who God truly was, but the man comes back and says you're right, I am a harsh man and I'm going to treat you harshly and throw you out into the outer darkness. That's not God. So what Jesus is doing in this parable and what he frequently does in parables is contrast the ways of God, the ways of gift-giving, the ways of love with the human realm.

We're still dealing with these similar economic systems today in the United States. We pride ourselves on having a meritocracy – if you just work hard enough you can work your way up. Well, we know that there are systems in place that make it so that we don't really have a meritocracy. People like me, I have been given a lot. My parents were given a lot. They were given a leg up through things like the GI Bill and my parents, who benefited from the economics of the GI Bill received from their parents and I continue to benefit from that.

Our black siblings were not able to benefit from things like the GI Bill and that systemic inequality continues with us today. We don't live in a meritocracy, we don't live in a country where there is justice for all, where everybody starts on an equal footing. We simply don't. And so Jesus knew this as it was the same back in his day and so he refused to play by that system. So when he talks about this third servant who buries the talent because he knew that the Roman Emperor was unjust, not merciful, and cruel, it's a way of subverting the system. It's a way of saying – I'm not playing that game. And if you need more proof about this, who at the end of his life was thrown into the outer darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth? Jesus. If there is a God character in this parable, if there is a Christ figure in this parable it is the third servant who refuses to play by the unjust economic political, and religious systems of his day. He refuses to play it and he suffers the consequences for it.

There's this other passage that Jesus says where the Kingdom of God comes into the world and suffers violence because the violent take it by force. That's what the Kingdom of God is like. It comes into oppressive systems and says – I'm not playing this game and I'm going to point to something better. I'm going to point to the God who calls us to multiply the fish and the loaves because if we just shared there's enough for everyone.

So this my friends, is what I think this parable is getting at. God is the one who comes to us in love. Who gives us gifts expecting nothing in return and invites us to love one another with those gifts. Invites us to care for one another, to live with one another in a more just and loving world not out of obligation, not out of a sense of guilt, but out of a sense that there is enough for everyone because God is love and God calls us to love one another as we love ourselves. Amen