

I want to start with an apology of sorts as last month was Pride Month and I had wanted to do something during a Sunday service to recognize this. However, our June Church calendar was already filled with a number of beautiful events and themes from the SS Picnic to Baptism to National Indigenous Peoples Day to having Jan speak last Sunday and so I ultimately ran out of Sundays. But I still want to speak to this and so while today is not technically still Pride Month I want to recognize the importance of this by reflecting on what I see as a central tenet of the Christian faith: the *active* pursuit of justice, inclusion, and love for all.

The Pride movement is about promoting “the rights, self-affirmation, dignity, equality, and increased visibility” of 2SLGBTQIA+ people ([Pride \(LGBTQ culture\) - Wikipedia](#)). I’ve stated before that when we moved to this area it was important to us to find a church community that embraced this, that stood for inclusivity, and so I deeply appreciate OMC and our desire to be allies and I think it is important that we *continue* to reflect on this, on why this is important, and how we can be even *more* active in the pursuit of dignity, equality, and inclusion for the LGBTQ+ community as well as anyone who has and does find themselves in some way on the margins.

So as I was sitting with these thoughts I found myself doing just that and reflecting back on my own journey and how and why inclusion became such an important value to me. And while I won’t share the entire journey this morning, I want to mention a few notable events and people that impacted me and contributed to the shift in my faith and understanding of who God is.

The time that Casadi and I spent in Princeton, New Jersey was foundational in this. During our time there we made some dear friends who introduced us to their some of their friends, among whom was a gay couple that were part of their church with one of them serving as an elder. This was the first time I remember meeting someone who was a member of and active in both the LGBTQ+ community and the Church. And as is so often the case, it is these relationships and getting to know real people that begins to shift our worldviews and perspectives and open our eyes to different ways of being.

And at the same time, my understanding was also shifting through my academic studies. Now, it may come as a surprise to you that I don’t remember everything I learned in school or university. I know all of you were better students and remember *everything* you were taught. But at least one lecture has always stuck with me. I was in a class about the history of the Roman Empire and we would focus on different aspects of the culture in that time and place, the context that would have influenced Jesus and the Apostles and our New Testament Scriptures. One lecture was a discussion about sexuality and it became clear that how sexuality was understood and practiced then, in that context, was very different from our context today. Which planted the question in me about how then do we understand Scripture passages referring to sexuality if there is such a difference between contexts. And the fruit of this and continued study has been the conviction that when interpreting and applying Scripture we *must* take seriously the context of the time the words were originally written and how that may have impacted what the original audiences would have heard and therefore how these words can apply to our context today. Not only that, but we must *also* take seriously the context of the time when Scriptures were translated. Here I would point to the documentary I’ve previously mentioned entitled “1946: The Mistranslation That Shifted Culture” and their examination of when the word ‘homosexual’ was initially translated into Scripture and how the context of that time impacted that decision.

That is all another sermon for another time but this is all to say that the more I studied, and the more I studied Scripture in particular and wrestled with how to interpret and apply its wisdom, the more my understanding began to shift.

Then there was another person that impacted me heavily. This was as part of small group in the church we attended in Princeton. In this group, I met a gay man who was intensely trying to repress this part of himself. He was in a heterosexual marriage because that was the only legitimate option for him within his faith community. And I would hear the suffering he was experiencing trying to fit himself into this box of what he was told he should be, what he was told God wanted him to be. And I would hear the things he was advised to do, in the name of helping him, that were simply abusive. Looking back I, of course, wish I had spoken up, presented an alternative, but at that time this all seemed to be part of what it meant to follow Jesus. It is deeply unsettling to look back on.

This came back to my mind as much more recently I had another unsettling experience where a member of the LGBTQ+ community and I were talking and through our conversation I gathered that they had spent considerable time in the Church and that this experience had been deeply traumatic. They asked me how I could, on the one hand, talk about the reality of religious trauma and harm and want to be part of helping people find some healing from this, while on the other hand continuing to be part of the church, and as a pastor no less. These two things seemed utterly incompatible to them. I tried, as best I could, to answer them with where I was coming from, why I remained committed to inclusivity *and* the life of the Church, but nothing I said could resolve this tension. The conversation, while amicable, did not get past this point and they left and I haven't seen them again.

This brief conversation has been troubling for me and resulted in a lot of introspection and grief. And of course I do not blame this person for not wanting to continue the conversation with me. I do not blame them for feeling that anyone actively involved in the Christian Church that had caused them so much harm could not be safe person to open up to. That feeling is entirely legitimate and understandable and I did not want them to go against their intuition and feeling in this. Still, there was and is a deep grief in me after this and I've wondered since then, is it worth it? Is it worth continuing to be involved in the Church if that involvement means many people, including members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, may not see me as a safe person, at least initially? The broader Church has done tremendous harm to a tremendous amount of people and many will see anyone involved in a church as guilty-by-association. Is it worth continuing to be committed to and invest in the life of the Church?

My answer, right now, is a conditional yes. Deep down I believe that the Church *can* be a source of good in this world, a source of healing, a source of love. Because I see God as the source of good, of healing, of love, hope, and peace.

So my answer is a *conditional* yes because I *do not* want to be part of a church that actively causes the trauma and harm that the people I've mentioned experienced. But I continue to invest in the Church *insofar* as we can have a healing and loving presence in the world that comes from connection to the God of love. *Insofar* as we can work for holistic peace and reconciliation following the God of peace. *Insofar* as we can stand for justice and inclusion and equality. And *not* just passively but as an *active* proponent of peace and justice and love and good for all. *Actively* seeking that *all* can experience the Divine and the resulting fruit of the Good Spirit (love, joy, peace, goodness, and the like), especially those who have been and are being marginalized.

Because this is the desire and movement of God that I see evidenced in Scripture, what I see God actively moving their people toward.

Something you may not know about me...I love tattoos. And one of the tattoos I have is the verse from Amos that we heard read that says: **“Let justice roll down like waters. Righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”** (Amos 5:24). This verse is also on a poster in my office, a sticker on my coffee cup. It has been dear to me for a long time because I see it as God’s desire for their world, for humanity. That our world would be a place where justice flows, reaching to everyone, to every being. That God’s people would be a people that actively works to that end.

I see this desire of God for justice, for inclusive love, and this call on God’s people to pursue this, throughout Scripture. Elsewhere in the Jewish scriptures we see God offering welcome and inclusion to those on the margins like immigrants, eunuchs, sex workers, and more.

And in the New Testament we see Jesus the Christ as one who continually showed a degree of inclusion that made others uncomfortable.

- He comes across a man with a skin disease, someone the religious rules said he should not come in contact with...but Jesus touches the man to heal them.
- He made a practice of dining with people deemed ‘sinners,’ showing acceptance and inclusion and love and causing other religious leaders to question him.
- When he comes across a lone Samaritan woman, someone whom a man in his position would have been encouraged to avoid...Jesus engages her in conversation and communicates dignity and love to this woman on the margins of society.
- When a woman supposedly caught in adultery is brought to him and the leaders state she should be stoned to death, Jesus intervenes on her behalf and again speaks compassion, forgiveness, dignity, love, even with a challenge for growth.
- Speaking to the religious leaders at another point, he acknowledges their fierce commitment to following rules, even to the point of tithing 10% of their spices but says that they **“forget about the more important matters of the Law: justice, peace, and faith.”** (Matt. 23:23). What good was this religious devotion if divorced from a pursuit of justice?

There are so many other passages I could mention but through the life and teaching of Jesus the Christ I see an invitation to a continual pursuit of greater justice and inclusion and love.

And I see this movement continue after Jesus’ ascension, in a story from Acts 10 that I reflected on a couple weeks ago on National Indigenous Peoples Day. It’s worth reflecting on again so in this story there is a Roman centurion named Cornelius who was praying one afternoon and he is visited by an angel of God who instructs him to send servants to Joppa to get the Apostle Peter. So Cornelius does this and meanwhile, in Joppa, Peter has a vision himself. In his vision there is something like a large sheet with all sorts of animals on it being lowered to earth. God speaks to Peter and tells him to eat of these animals but Peter says, **“Surely not, Lord!...I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”** And then Peter is told, **“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”**

So Peter refuses God’s command in this vision because he understood the religious customs that he grew up with to forbid him to eat of certain animals that were present in this vision. And Peter, at least

initially, cannot imagine setting aside or expanding on his current religious customs, theology, worldview, in order to welcome a new revelation, a different way of seeing and understanding.

So the story continues and we're told Peter is thinking, wondering about what this vision means, when Cornelius' servants arrive. And the Spirit tells Peter to go with them, so Peter does. When Peter arrives at Cornelius' house we see that Cornelius had invited friends and family together in anticipation of listening to Peter. And Peter begins by saying, **"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean..."**

Peter knows the laws and customs he grew up with and knows he is not following them by coming here but he is beginning to understand the meaning of the vision and what God was teaching him.

Peter continues, **"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right..."** And Peter goes on to talk of Jesus the Christ and while he is doing this, the Holy Spirit comes down on those listening. We're told, **"The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles."** (10:44-45).

Now, I notice the condescending language toward Gentiles as I read this story which seems to be indicative of a prejudice in the theology and religious practice that Peter and his company had adopted. Which makes the point all the more clear that Peter undergoes a radical shift toward greater inclusivity here. He had operated under a certain understanding, a certain worldview his whole life. A worldview that emphasized some as insiders and others as outsiders. And God challenges him on this and moves him to expand his understanding. Peter moves toward greater inclusivity.

Now I recognize the easy pushback here is that this story deals *only* with the inclusion of Gentiles and we *cannot* extrapolate from this anything beyond that. And without getting too bogged down in details about biblical interpretation and theology (there are many others who have done a great job of this sort of detailed explanation and I've included a list of some of those resources in my sermon notes in the foyer), so without getting into much detail I would just say that my response would be that while true that *this* story only explicitly talks about the inclusion of Gentiles, I would argue that this is just one of many places in Scripture where we are shown the movement of God being towards increasing inclusivity and that our responsibility as Christ-followers is to follow in this movement, to live it forward today and in the future, and continue to dismantle barriers and work towards the Church being a place free from division, discrimination, exclusion, marginalization of others.

And that is my desire for OMC and for the capital 'C,' Church. That we would have a faith that follows the Christ in ever-increasing, ever-expanding love. That we would not simply be passively inclusive and affirming but continually moving more and more towards being an *active* proponent of radical inclusivity. An active force working to remove barriers to the abundant life of God, to love, joy, peace, and hope, for all people. And while my focus today has been the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, this hope extends beyond, to any and all people who are marginalized whether that marginalization is based on sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic status, employment status, immigration status, religion, age.

I feel I could say so much more but I'll close with words from Kaitlin Curtice, the Indigenous author that I quoted a couple weeks ago, that speak my prayer for us. May we follow God into "**a story of faith that's always bigger, always more inclusive, always making room at a bigger and better table full of lavish food that has already been prepared for everyone and for every created thing.**" (p. 17). Amen.

**Resources:**

Sex, God, & the Conservative Church – Tina Schermer Sellers

Just Love – Margaret Farley

Body, Sex, and Pleasure – Christine Gudorf

Queer Prophets – Ruth Hunt (ed.)

Changing our Mind – David Gushee

Liberating Sexuality – Miguel De La Torre

Transforming – Austin Hartke

Stranger at the Gate – Mel White

God and the Gay Christian – Matthew Vines

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In This Together:

“We envision and work toward a just world where LGBTQ+ people are fully integrated, recognized, respected, and valued in a spirit of mutuality in Anabaptist communities in Canada.”