

“Love Your Transgender Neighbor As You Love Yourself” by Cynthia Dahlin

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost



July 9, 2023

Good Morning.

Deborah Sokolove asked me to preach in Pride Month, but I was out of town most of June. So I'm late, but it works out in time, as my message flows right out of what the delegates from New Story Leadership talked about last week: change is hard, and sometimes harder within ourselves than we are expecting, even when we have the best of intentions and desires.

Capernum Temple Leaders Opposed Jesus' Teachings

This week's Gospel reading includes a part of a

longer story and rant by Jesus. John the Baptist had heard about Jesus' miracles and teaching and sent his followers to ask Jesus if he was the expected Messiah. Jesus sent them back to John and said to report on all his miracles, and blessed everyone who took no offense at his actions. By this, he is beginning to criticize and preach against the Jewish leaders, who charge John is possessed by demons as he is a desert hermit, and call him, Jesus, a glutton and drunkard for eating with sinners and tax collectors. He chastises the leaders of small villages of Chorazin and Bethsaida, both in walking distance from Capernum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and says that if the deeds of power done in those towns had been done in places outside the lands of Israel, those people would have repented and sat in sackcloth and ashes, but not these towns, which he knew well. The deeds of power he was probably talking about were the actions to exclude those who the leaders of the Jewish community thought unworthy, such as tax collectors, or ignore prostitutes, or beggars, or those who were not Jewish, but needing help.

And then Jesus gives thanks that those who are not the high and mighty can see that Jesus is trying to teach them about the new community, revealing that they will be given grace. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

The Difficulty to Change, and to Allow Gender Change

Jesus is talking about the inability of those who are deeply involved in the Jewish rabbinical culture, the powerful of the day, to turn away from an old set of laws and directives, and try Jesus' new radical practice of loving one's neighbor as oneself. It is really hard to change.

When Jesus says "Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens," he does mean those with poverty,

sickness and mourning, but I think he also includes those of us who have baggage. Baggage of past training, past situations, past relationships that have taught us to make snap judgements of good and evil to ourselves and others.

One of those places we are used to flipping a switch is for gender. I got used to standardized forms with white/black, married/single, and male/female. As cultural norms and punishments for disrupting these easy choices lowered in some places, we found more people expressed their needs and desires for options—why do we have that on/off, male/female switch? What is it good for? Why only male/female and why only heterosexuality as acceptable choices?

Being a Transgender Ally

Just to give you a guide as to where this sermon is going, I could have talked about the experiences of injustice of LGBTQ+ people in Virginia, who this year have seen their access to school bathrooms matching their gender revoked, books reflecting their gender removed from schools, and health access and information removed from all state programs. Right now, the equal employment and housing access laws that were passed three years ago still stand, but protecting those basic rights were the major effort of all Equality Virginia allies this year—no new progress was hoped for at all. But you can read about these issues in the Washington Post. I am going to talk about the difficulty and Christian challenge of being a gay and transgender parent and ally.

I have had gay and lesbian friends all of my life, and I have seen the dance of hiding this and the trust when my friends knew that if I revealed their truth, they would face consequences. When I was chair of the No. Va. Women's Political Caucus, two of my sister officers were gay, a lawyer and a doctor, and we needed to ask my father, who was Counsel to a House of Representatives committee, for some advice on

legislation. My father thought these two women had outstanding minds and was always praising them—and he also kept saying he didn't approve of homosexuality. The complicity of silence meant my Women's Caucus friends enjoyed my father's help, and also enjoyed his dry wit—he'd come over to my house and we'd have beers while he helped us strategize, but he never asked about their relationships or the pain of being gay in a state which was even more conservative than it is now. In those days, we were working on ERA and pay equity—floated support for decriminalizing homosexual relationships, but working on marriage equality and workplace equality for LGBTQ people was far out of reach. I never challenged my father to change his beliefs, except to give the weak phrase, "some of my best friends are gay."

I knew my daughter was gay before she did—Kate Cudlipp had asked for straight allies to support some legislation, and my daughter came in great fear to tell me she could not do this as she thought she was bi-sexual. After many years and life experience, I knew that saying she was bi was a gateway to telling me she was gay, or finding a first relationship—she had gotten to age 18 with no real romances, and I had realized she was probably gay and didn't know it yet. Meanwhile, over half of the Girl Scout Troop I led through Senior Year of High School had come out. I was used to the idea of gay and lesbian, and loved many gay and lesbian people.

I became active in People of Faith—Equality Virginia, a group very cleverly organized as ordained ministers carry much more weight in Richmond politics due to the heavy presence of religious conservatives. And thank goodness, in this group, we had training in transgender rights, medical and insurance issues, the absence of trained counselors and medical professionals understanding these issues in Virginia, along with our regular briefings on marriage equality, before the Supreme Court decision, and

employment and housing discrimination, after marriage equality was ordered by the Supreme Court.

I didn't realize that I was educated and tolerant, but had not really thought about transgender people deeply. I sympathized, but maybe didn't really empathize. Or maybe hadn't thought about my own conditioning and upbringing. I knew two transgender or gender fluid Seekers well, but had not truly empathized with the depth of opposition they must have felt to get there.

My son let us know of his transition in 2017—just after Ron and I hosted a joint 40th wedding anniversary party for us and a 10th anniversary party for him and his spouse. One college friend of my son's college friends kept subtly mixing in "he" pronouns for my then daughter. He had been dressing in what he told me was a "gender neutral" way for several years, and I still do not know when he actually transitioned socially, as the distance between DC and his home allowed my questions, like "how do you consider yourself—I see you have cut your hair short?"— to be answered: "I want to represent a more gender neutral stance—it's a political position." And I hadn't pushed any further.

A month or two after this, he let us know he was going to change his gender legally, and asked for ideas to come up with a new surname, which the family adopted immediately.

So here is where I found my baggage.

1. I had grown up with the teaching that we always have to pick a box, male or female, on every form we fill out. Did it matter for schools, purchases, jobs—maybe it did for insurance...?? After considering this issue, I started asking "do we have to ask race, or age? Are these categories helping or separating people, maybe holding some people back?"

2. I had not thought much about changing the check in the box—there were a few Life magazine stories of Christine Jorgenson, but it was rare and out of my attention span. And I had thought about transgender mainly in the physical surgery aspect that Christine Jorgenson had publicized.
3. I had a huge amount of pride in taking Latin, French, and later Greek and Hebrew, and was very proud of knowing pluperfects, noun genders, and those rare suffixes for possessives. I had to really learn that my proving I know what a singular pronoun is is not more important than giving another individual the chance to express their identity. I would say “it pains me to use ‘they’,” and reading about new pronouns gave me heartburn. Then I started remembering how much effort I had put into getting Virginia legislators to call me “Ms.” in the early ‘80s, not wanting my marital status on display, wanting to be accepted as just myself.

I heard this news as the Pharisees and Sadducees heard Jesus. The Pharisees were keepers of the word of Moses—they valued rules and probably promulgated the myriad of rules that appear in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Lots of ideas about what to eat and how to purify oneself. Why listen to the meat of the matter, when you can dismiss any challenge if the person before you has broken a rule and has to the starting gate before coming back to state their issue? And the Sadducees were the religious scholars and bureaucracy of the temple, living in luxury, not thinking about sharing all the offerings with the poor or the whole community.

When my son transitioned, my first effort was educating myself. He seemed a bit vulnerable after reaching out to our whole family—including aunts, uncles and cousins, and I did not try to ask a lot of questions. I gave him my support, but I did not yet have full understanding, rather, I was more in shock. I was leading with my brain, before my

heart.

Can We Accept Transgender People as Children Do—Just as People?

Here is the idea that unlocks this weird gospel reading we have today. Jesus reproaches the leadership of the temple for exploiting their power and said: “you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants.” Jesus wants to release us from the yoke of the rabbinical laws, and says his burden is easy. I don’t agree that Jesus’ burden is easy, but what is it? To love my neighbor as myself. The concept is easy—I am not admitting that living it out is easy!

But I found that I really began to empathize rather than understand transitioning when I talked to younger people. One Australian friend said in a very matter of fact way:

We have three parts to our identity: our body, our gender identity and our sexuality. For people with simple lives in our society these blocks all line up. But there are a lot of combinations if you rotate each block around like a puzzle.

The way she said this, the matter of fact tone, snapped into my consciousness, and has helped me understand the many letters that add onto the LGBTQ+ labeling we use. I stopped trying to label whether a person was transgender or gay, or what if they hadn’t had surgery. The gender identity was a personal identity owned by the individual, and the body and sexuality were their own business!

I also attended TransParent meetings for a year or two—TransParent is the coalition of parents supporting children going through and living through transition. I stopped after a while as most of the parents were having to deal with the huge responsibility of helping minor children make decisions dealing with uncooperative schools, or medical

decisions, and I felt guilty that my son had transitioned as a highly qualified lawyer who had taken many gender and society courses at Harvard. The responsibility was never mine.

When Jesus calls us to remember children and be more childlike in many places in the Bible, I think this is the hard part. Remember how children react with indignation, moral outrage to unfairness? And as Seekers, we try to channel that moral outrage to action? I think Jesus wants us to feel that indignation. Jesus wants us to love everyone.

The Christian Church Has Contributed to Hate against Transgender People

I think the generational difference in dealing with marriage equality, transgender people, and even abortion show that the younger generation, who are less likely to have grown up in a church and have not heard preaching against any change of social customs have less prejudice against these things.

But there is a very large segment of our society who fear change—the arguments against marriage equality was that this would devalue their existing ideas of marriage, as if each time someone marries we weigh that relationship against our own. The Christian conservative argument against abortion is about the sin for society, and the needs and health of existing women and their families is not even listened to. The arguments against allowing transgender people to exist seem to be mainly about unfair advantages in women's sports! This is repeated on Fox News around the world, so that a friend of mine in Sydney repeated this problem to me, not accepting my son's choice, and I realized Fox News is the main news about the U.S. in Australia—the opinions are presented as if they are US consensus. But the Anglican Church in Sydney is frequently against LGBTQ+ rights, too.

Right after my son transitioned, Equality Virginia began to focus on transgender rights along with gay rights in a more focused way. When I went to Richmond for lobby day, I saw extreme hate in a way I hadn't for sixty years. Proud Boys with guns were trying to block the way of our group into the Capitol building, and I was actually fearful for the lives of, especially, a few young transgender women who had dressed a bit over the top. These men looked like they would shoot these young people. I got in front of them as I did not think the gunmen would lose their tempers and shoot an older woman.

The only other time when I really remembered that level of palpable hate was when I was in second grade, and my school in Alexandria VA, near the current Landmark shopping center, was integrated. I had gotten off my school bus and a bus with two lone black children pulled up. There was a line of adults who had seemed invisible to me—maybe parents dropping off kids?—and they started screaming at these poor girls! Some teacher or maybe the principal walked the girls into the building, and I felt so sad that all this hate was focused on these kids just for existing.

This flashback was very important for me. I think we all have a Christian responsibility to help unlock the triggers to this hate, or gender, race or country—it is not learned by knowing an individual's story, but from hating change. As the New Story Leadership delegates described last week, a society can start walking down a path—1000 or 400 years ago, as with slavery, and stop looking at why that path was chosen.

I want to end back on the Pride Month theme. During my last month's travels, my husband, Ron and I went to Transylvania. In the ancient town of Sigiswara, now known as the birthplace of Dracula, there is a church on the hill, whose name is The Church on the Hill, with a fresco with God with three faces: an old man, a young man, and a woman. And nearby is a statue of God as a woman. This is part of a

UNESCO World Heritage site. In the 14th or 15th century, as this church as being built, I think there was less of a boundary around gender. And the Hebrew language had a much greater use of gender neutral pronouns and nouns than modern times. We do not have to hate a more gender fluid society—there have been many our world's past.

I had to loosen my own comfortable check the gender boxes of my youth and listen to today's youth. I was sitting at a Pho restaurant near my home, where there are large communal tables, and some students introduced themselves. "I am Sarah, and this is Sam, who is fluid on the gender spectrum." Their group of students, who have gathered there before, were totally accustomed to this introduction "Hi, I'm Cynthia" was what I said. I am happy to see change, and more than acceptance—inclusion and caring for people who do not wish us to check boxes anymore. I want our country and our wider church to be more like the children—meeting someone and accepting them if they are kind and good, not according to rules or status. And the righteous anger Jesus was wielding against the temple hierarchy for valuing the powerful over all the people around them with real needs and hopes is what I hope we at Seekers are trying to wield in the Racial and Ethnic Justice Ministry. May we continue to add LGBTQ rights into our consciousness.