

“Male and Female and...”

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Lawrence Park Community Church

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Pride Sunday

Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He has a pretty good idea that things will go badly for him there, but he is determined to go just the same. Before he gets there, he gives some of his power to his disciples so they can heal people and cast out spirits on their own. This has gone to their heads a bit. As they walk, they have been debating who among them is the greatest. Jesus has counselled that you don't get to heaven by being arrogant, but through humility and serving others. They have not absorbed this message very well yet.

Back then if you walked to Jerusalem from Galilee, you faced a problem. You had to pass through the region of Samaria. The Samaritans lived in what is now the West Bank of Israel. Long ago they had been Jews, but history, invasions and religious controversies had taken their faith and culture in a different direction. They no longer worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem. They thought the Jews were wrong, the Jews thought the Samaritans were wrong. So, Jews were allowed to walk through Samaria, but there was no guarantee the Samaritans would make it easy.

Sure enough, the disciples come back to Jesus with news that the Samaritans have turned them away. Then they make this outrageous statement: should we bring down fire from heaven to wipe these people out? Once again, the disciples seem high on their newfound power. But why would they suggest such a thing?

To our ears, this punishment invokes another town's terrible punishment by fire from above: Sodom. It is the Bible's most famous story of God sending fire to wipe out a town (Genesis 19). That story has cast a long shadow. It gave us the term sodomy, which for a long time was a crime in Canada, and still is in many countries in the world. It became synonymous with gay sex.

You may remember the story: God has heard that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah have become too sinful. God sends two angels to visit to see if it is all true. Abraham's nephew, Lot, puts them up for the night. But after dinner, all the men in the village demand that the angels come out so they may be raped by these men. The angels intervene, blinding the men so Lot and his family can escape before fire rains down from heaven to destroy Sodom and its sister city Gomorrah. They are told not to look back. But Lot's wife does, and she is turned into a pillar of salt. The towns are destroyed with fire from heaven.

In our culture, that story is remembered as a warning about the sin of homosexual sex. But as I have explained this month in our Bible study, in Christ's time, that was not what this story was about. The men outside Lot's house were threatening to rape the men, not have consensual sex with them. Rape is always wrong, whether it is straight or gay sex. No, to the people who wrote the Bible, the crime of Sodom was that it failed to show good hospitality to the angels by threatening them with violence. That was a terrible crime. Hospitality, not sexuality, was the moral of the story.

And that's why the disciples ask Jesus if they can rain down fire on this Samaritan town. Like Sodom, it has refused to provide hospitality to these travellers. Shouldn't it be treated like Sodom? After all, Jesus is God in human form. If anyone deserves hospitality, it is Jesus.

This is the day of the Pride parade, the highlight of Pride month in Toronto. Our city has been providing hospitality for queer visitors from all over the world. Almost half a million people from outside of Ontario visit Toronto for Pride each year, with most of those people coming from outside of Canada. Pride is a boon for our hotel industry each year, and restaurants welcome their business, too. Toronto has the second largest pride parade in the world, and it is only possible because we open our doors to queer people and show them hospitality.

However, this year, it is harder. When the new American government came in, they declared on the first day that diversity, equity and inclusion programs would be shut down. The president declared that there are only two genders, male and female, a clear swipe at trans people. The drive to shut down DEI programs is taking many forms. Government websites in the US have taken down references to women and queer people. Government libraries have removed books that talk about gay rights. And corporations who want to do business with the American government are scaling back their diversity, equity and inclusion programs. This means that corporations have stopped providing seminars on how to combat racism and homophobia. They have also scaled back their funding to local Pride parades. That chill has been felt here, too. The Toronto Pride organization has reported that several of its major corporate sponsors have

pulled out. This won't affect the festivities this year, but it may have consequences for next year's parade.

Our capacity to be hospitable to queer people is being compromised by a shift in how our culture sees minorities. The hostility to DEI programs and trans people is coming from conservative Christians. They say that the Bible declares that there are only two genders. In the book of Genesis it declares that when God created human beings, it states:

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

To conservative Christians this suggests that there are only two genders, and anything else is a mistake or deviant. The president has endorsed this view. A cultural shift is underway towards a narrow definition of gender, which is already affecting the funding of Pride festivities even here in Toronto.

But is all of this really Christian? In today's scripture reading, Jesus rebukes his followers when they suggest raining down fire on the town which had rejected them. He tells them some evil spirit has gotten into you. Jesus' goal is to love people, to help them, not destroy or punish them.

Jesus has shown over and over that he will go to where people are really at and be with them. He doesn't shun people. He enters their homes, he invites sinners to dinner, he hangs out with women who are considered second class citizens. When Jesus has a choice, he always chooses compassion and presence over judgement and punishment.

So, on this Pride Sunday, let's try that approach with the Bible. Let's see what else it has to say about gender.

We all know those famous words from the book of Ecclesiastes 3:

3 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

It's lovely poetry. We often hear it at funerals. Those words are offered as a way of understanding life. There's a time to plant seeds, and a time to harvest. True. But does that mean there is no time to pull weeds, or to provide fertilizer? No time to chase off the birds that would eat the seeds? Of course there is. A good crop needs more than planting and harvesting, there are sorts of steps in between.

The people who wrote the Bible were agrarian people, they know all of this. But in the Bible, statements about life are often made poetically by stating the beginning and ending of things, with everything in between left unsaid, but understood. This is called a "merism." It would be like in our time saying, there is a time to enter school, and a time to graduate. But of course we understand that to graduate we must study and pass exams.

So, Biblical scholars suggest that when the Bible says God made humans male and female, the Bible is not ignoring every other type of gender in between. Indeed, the ancient Hebrews knew every well that there are many kinds of gender. In their time, courts included eunuchs. These were men who had been castrated so that there would be no risk of confusing the royal blood lines by getting a queen or princess pregnant. Eunuchs could be trusted. In the New Testament, one of the first people to be baptized is a eunuch from Africa, an Ethiopian court official (Acts 8:26-40).

Jesus also speaks about eunuchs. He says this in the Gospel of Matthew:

12 For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.” (Matthew 19:12)

The ancient Jews recognized seven different genders in their book of laws, the Talmud.. There are those who are born with no gender attributes. Those who are born both male and female, what we could call hermaphrodites. Those who change their gender, like eunuchs. People who look like women, but cannot get pregnant. There are people who never develop sexual characteristics at all, the tumtum. The ancients were not fools. They could see that nature and culture includes more than two genders.

The challenge for queer people is that their identity is recreated with every generation. Italians give birth to Italians. Black people give birth to Black children. White people give birth to white children. But straight people can give birth to straight kids or gay kids. And it can take a while for a child to realize they do not share the same sexuality as their parents. Each child who realizes they are queer will face a choice about whether to hide their identity, or to seek out others like them. This often means leaving their family, often leaving home to seek out others who are queer, too. That is not easy, and it happens in every generation. They often feel like strangers among the people they grew up with. Some families make this easy, others make it hard. Many churches make it hard, too.

But let us remember that Jesus does not ask any of us to deny ourselves to fit in with what our families expect. Jesus has come to show us how to thrive as human beings, loved by God. In today's scripture reading, he asks several people to follow him. They make excuses. They say, let me go deal with some family matters first, let me bury my father, let me finish plowing. But Jesus replies, those who follow me won't look back. They will do what is right, right now. Jesus gets that being committed to a cause or an identity can take you away from your family if they don't get it. What matters most is being true to yourself, and when strangers come calling, to welcome them with pride. Happy Pride.

Peace be with you.