

“What Does It Really Mean to Love?”

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Pride Sunday

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Today's Gospel lesson comes from the Gospel of Matthew 22:34-40. Before we hear the text, it is important to know that this comes during the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry, just a few days before his crucifixion. He has entered Jerusalem triumphantly, cleansed the Temple, and is now teaching openly in the Temple courts. Now one might think here that Jesus has a little ADHD(!), but in reality, the religious leaders recognize that His popularity and authority threaten their own, so they begin a series of public confrontations designed to discredit Him before the crowds. Rather than engaging in thoughtful conversation, they attempt to trap Jesus with difficult theological and political questions. So just before the 34th verse, Jesus had just silenced the Sadducees. Here now these words from the Gospel of Matthew:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Let us pray. *Dear God, we give you thanks for your son Jesus Christ who was able to remain calm and stand tall through the ridiculous confrontations he had to endure. We give you thanks for your unconditional love – your love that has no limits. We ask that you remind each of us that we are loved and perfect just the way we are! Amen.*

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" was not an unusual question. Jewish rabbis recognized 613 commandments in the Torah and often debated which were "weightier" than others. The question may have begun as another test, but in Mark's Gospel the scribe appears genuinely impressed by Jesus' answer.

The phrase “the Law and the Prophets” refers to the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is saying that every command God has given is ultimately an expression of these two foundational loves:

- wholehearted love for God, and
- genuine love for one’s neighbor.

Love for our neighbor is not a substitute for love for God, nor vice versa. The second flows from the first. To love God rightly is to love those made in God’s image. So here is where I get confused with people! If we Christians claim that we *are* Christian and acknowledge that we *are* created in God’s image, then why...WHY are we judging each other? Why are we being hateful and causing a fuss over who our neighbor loves? Why are we being nasty and telling someone in the LGBTQ+ community that they are going to hell, or excluding them from church? I’m sorry, but that is not unconditional love. You cannot possibly love someone unconditionally if you only love them when they meet your expectations. You cannot love someone unconditionally if you believe love requires approving of every choice they make. You cannot love someone unconditionally if you only extend grace to those who you think deserve it.

Unconditional love does not begin by asking who someone loves; it begins by seeing them as a person created in the image of God. To love unconditionally is to refuse to let our judgment become a barrier to compassion, dignity, and care.

James 4:11-12 reads, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another speaks evil against the law and judges the law, but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?”

Yesterday at Pride, we saw some hate and judgement shown by protestors. They wanted to spew hate and ruin the event. But guess what! Thousands showed up for the festival. So much love was shown for one another and everyone who was there for the actual festival had lots of fun. I’m not going to lie, it did make our day when a protestor was arrested in front of all of us 😊 Love conquers hate!

In my 34 years on this earth, I have heard some of the judgiest and nastiest remarks fired at the LGBTQ+ community. And yes, we’re still dealing with these today. I’m going to share a few with you now with some commentary. I do apologize if this is triggering for any of you.

We are abominations. I don’t know how so! How on earth would you consider us an abomination?

We are going against God's wishes. Interesting, because I thought we were created in God's own image. I certainly didn't choose to be gay. Did you choose to be straight?!

We are broken or sick. Not to jinx myself here, but I haven't had a broken bone yet! All kidding a side, being gay or transgender is not an illness. What is sick, is one's hate for someone because they simply do not understand nor care to.

We are ruining marriage. I'm sorry – but I don't think you need any our help with that! If a spouse comes out later in life, while it is hurtful, we also need to be sympathetic to their upbringing. What kept them in the closet this long?

We are pedophiles. Woah! I don't think so! This makes me mad...how inappropriate. The Zero Abuse Project shared scientific research where they found that only 21 percent of the child molesters were homosexual and nearly 80 percent of the men who molested little boys were heterosexual or bisexual and most of these men were married and had children of their own.

We're a threat. Who are we a threat to? Are you that insecure? And I hate to tell you, gay people are not looking or interested in hitting on you. If anything, we *might* be judging your outfit!

Okay, all kidding aside. The LGBTQ+ people have long been subjected to recurring forms of hateful rhetoric and have heard these words and have also heard that "God doesn't love you," "You don't belong here," "You need to change before you're welcome," and "you're going to hell."

The transgender community continues be subject to extreme hate. We see this as trans people are currently being produced as props in the latest culture war. Eric Stanley, an associate professor in gender and women's studies at UC Berkely says, "These anti-trans bills are rooted in an obsession with the idea of trans people's bodies. The politicians authoring these bills are saying, 'Let me study you, produce you as a singular object outside of yourself, so that I cannot just terrorize you, but produce your life as terror.'" It **has** to stop!

Drag Queens are also being used as a current prop – a distraction or smoke and mirrors from other things happening in our administration. I understand some people might view drag as objectifying women, and while this may be true at times, I view drag as an art. People getting to express themselves. Drag Queens are not getting into character and spewing hate to children at story time! Honestly, kids listen to artists who spew hateful rhetoric and/or foul language all the time! Drag Queens are simply trying to share their art – and why shouldn't kids be exposed to them?

In April, the Choir is going to perform Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard* – a powerful 2-hour work that shares about the life of this young man. You see, Matthew Shepard was brutally murdered out in Wyoming for being gay. His story and his

bright spark live on through the Matthew Shepard Foundation, this octavo, the Laramie Project, and by so many working endlessly to spread love across our land.

Lady Gaga, I'm sure you've heard of her(!), was raised as a Christian. She has openly stated that while she believes in Jesus and God, she has struggled at times with certain views and rules of the institutional Catholic Church. She is known for mixing Christian views in her music. Lady Gaga's iconic song, "Born This Way" has become a national anthem in the Gay community. Several lyrics read, "My mama told me when I was young 'we are all born superstars.'" "There's nothing wrong with loving who you are" she said, "Cause He made you perfect, babe."

Her chorus goes,

"I'm beautiful in my way
'cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track, baby
I was born this way.
Don't hide yourself in regret
just love yourself and you're set
I'm on the right track, baby
I was born this way.

When Stan, Allison, and I were planning that we'd like for today to be a fully celebrated Pride Sunday, Stan mentioned that I should give today's message. Allison was there cheerleading, but I wasn't sure. I see my role in worship as leading the music – I have often cringed when I see musicians playing a keyboard instrument, leading the choir, singing a solo, AND talking in church! Personally, I find it too showy and a little self-centered. Again, this is how I personally feel and just wasn't sure that I should give the message. I did promise them, however, that I would at least think about it. Well, two nights later, I was abruptly awakened in the middle of the night by the Holy Spirit. There she was informing me that I was to give the sermon on Pride Sunday and put the Matthew passage in my head. "Yes, ma'am!" I replied! "I will do this. But did you really have to wake me up in the middle of the night?!" If you know me, then you know I have a hard time sleeping because I worry about a lot of things – anywhere from my to-do list, rehearsals, music constantly flowing through my head, the state of the world...you name it! So sleep *is* important to me! But...I guess that's what I get for being stubborn in the first place! I came back to church and shared with Allison and Stan that the Holy Spirit informed me that I shall stand in the pulpit on Pride Sunday! They were delighted – I mean, Allison literally was cheering! Let me pause and say how much I love working with my amazing and supportive colleagues and friends here at Market Square! And I love getting to serve alongside this wonderful and accepting and loving congregation.

In our conversation, Stan suggested that I give testimony into my own life as a part of today's message.

I am generally an open book, but in full transparency and honesty, I often hide the pain and troubling parts. I want life to be fun, joyous, exciting – so I often tend to suppress the darkness. And before anyone gasps, I know it is not healthy and I'm currently working on things in therapy!

So, I'm sure it's hard to tell and many of you didn't know this, but I am gay! 😊 I knew from an early age that I was different. And as I prepare to share a *glimpse* of my life of 34 years, I want to preface this to say that I am not looking for sympathy or pity. Everything that I have been through has helped shape me to the person I am today.

I grew up in a lower-middle class home. My dad walked out on my mom, sister, and I when I was entering middle school, and thus my mom was a single mother raising us. We were fortunate that my mom's parents, my grandparents, were involved greatly in our lives. My sister and I would go to their house after school, and we would spend every day in the summer with them while our mom worked. My sister and I had a great upbringing and were raised in the church. We were and are loved very much! My mom would juggle the bills just to keep the roof over our head. She would work hard at her job all day long and then make sure she was present for my sister's and my activities.

My grandparents had two ladies living across from them and they did not have a close relationship with them. I remember one day when I was a kid and inquiring about "the lady with the truck," my grandmother informed me that they're "funny people." Like they tell jokes, they entertain people, what?! Oh no...that is not what she meant. That was my grandmother informing me that they were lesbians. *Interesting!* Please keep in mind, my grandmother was raised in the hills of Hazard, Kentucky!

In my mom's neighborhood, we were neighbors with a family who had 5 kids. Now these "kids" were way older than Caitlyn and I. Michael and Beth Anne are gay. As Caitlyn and I got older and would attempt to run around the neighborhood with them, I remember that my mom sat us down one day and said, "If you guys are gay, I will love and support you. Your dad, grandparents, and your uncle will not approve." In the moment, my sister and I told our mother that we weren't gay! For me, I knew I figured I was, but I was still trying to figure things out.

Over the years, my mom would occasionally ask me if I was gay. I'm not sure why because my sense for fashion didn't arrive until I was an upperclassman in college! I would tell her that I wasn't. Working through this in therapy, I have realized that her telling me that certain family members wouldn't approve and my grandmother saying we're "funny people," had me scared of coming out for fear of disappointing them and losing their love. I knew that my mom would love me. We were close (and we still are!)

and I didn't want our relationship to possibly change. I want to share that my mother had no ill-will in asking me or telling me that family members wouldn't approve. She was being a protective mother and I understand that. But why should she have to protect me. Families should have unconditional love! Families should support their children and family members regardless. Being gay is not a lifestyle choice. Again, we're created in God's image!

I was bullied on a regular basis in school. I wasn't even out – my peers were making assumptions based off of me being small in stature, having a high-pitched squeaky voice, and being flamboyant. While I am secure in myself now, I was not back then. I wanted to be liked – be popular. I wanted to fit in and be one of the "cool kids." I was popular within the music program, thankfully because of my talent, but I definitely didn't fit in elsewhere.

I remember this one punk (sorry – not sure I can say that from the pulpit!) would trip me in the hallway and make fun of me. This one day was a low day and I was tired of being picked on. I was approached by another kid who offered me a cigarette. I was so close to actually trying it. Thankfully I didn't! But I would often lay in bed at night and ask God to take me up to heaven where it would be a way nicer place than here.

Because of my God-given talents, music came easily to me. Because I could conduct and lead ensembles, my high school directors would give me lots of leadership roles. While it should have been a great experience, it wasn't fully great! I didn't know how to handle certain people, the jocks in particular. I would be leading rehearsals and I won't forget how this one kid would constantly interrupt class and would be a jerk. His comments about me would have the class losing their focus and begin laughing and/or talking. I went to a performing arts high school, so many of us there wanted to practice and perform well. I never confided in my family about being bullied. "I'm already dealing with being gay and not wanting them to know; I don't want to burden my family with bullying" constantly ran through my head. So I held it all in and found that I became a very defensive person. I used humor to try and fit in as well as a defensive mechanism. I would give my friends great advice about coming out – "oh, your family will love you regardless!" But why couldn't I heed my own advice...especially knowing that I had a loving family?!

I did end up telling my sister in high school but swore her to secrecy. When she would get mad at me, she would often call me gay or a fag. She would get in trouble by my mom and would say, "well he is" and I, of course, quickly had to deny it. It took me until the end of my freshman year of college to finally come out to my mom, who was upset that I hadn't been honest with her earlier. We make coming out a huge to do...and it shouldn't be. For we are all on different timelines on figuring out ourselves.

Studying at Lebanon Valley College was a wonderful four years of my life. My primary focuses were my degree, practicing, and my church job. There really wasn't a party

scene there for me. And that was typical for most of my life – I put my focus in my music, for I had peace when I was practicing and creating music. Now when I got to grad school, things changed! Don't get me wrong, I was practicing even more(!), but I ended up forming a great group of friends – most of us were gay guys. We did everything together. But I struggled with our group because it seemed that no one was able to be there for you when life would get tough. We were good on all the happy things, but not the hard things. I had my first long-term relationship here. I was dating one of the church choir members. Long story short, this became a very abusive relationship for me. But no one was there to help! Southerners have a way of putting a skirt on things. ("Bless your heart!" isn't a compliment!) People would say, "I'm sorry" at most, but half of the time, no one wanted to be bothered. Unfortunately, it took me four years too long to escape this toxic relationship.

So where are we at now?! I guess you could say that I'm doing pretty well. I continue to work on fully loving myself. I am married to my handsome husband, Justin. We have three cute fur babies, own a home, and had the wedding of the century! Justin was accepted splendidly into my family as I to his. When he was going to join us on family vacation, I asked my mother to inform her brother who Justin really is to me. She gladly did so. My one cousin shared that her dad sat all the kids down (there are 7 of them plus several spouses!) and read from the Bible. Insert eyeroll! But whatever! Needless to say, everyone at least pretended to be nice on vacation and some even remarked that they enjoyed meeting Justin! I have two wonderful jobs and I'm supported by so many fabulous people!

I mentioned earlier that being bullied while in leadership roles made me become defensive. This became a thing while I would be in front of groups. Over my tenure here at Market Square, I have been able to work through this. As we celebrate 10 years of ministry together, you will hear me talk a bit about why I felt called to Market Square. Yes, I wanted the challenge of getting the music ministry back to the level this church was known for, but I also wanted to serve in a church that doesn't just talk the talk, but walks the walk. The tent encampment for the unhoused really sparked an interest in me. And friends, we **are** a church that walks the walk. I feel most comfortable here.

My students give me courage. Hearing how I give them the encouragement they need just makes my heart beat faster. A student recently wrote me a thank you card. In the card he shared that seeing how I "strut" through this dark world and the confidence I carry, gave him the encouragement for him to come out to his family. We have since chatted about how that experience went. Unfortunately for him, it did not go well. His family is conservative and didn't accept this – they told him it was a "phase". It breaks my heart! We continue to talk about this and I hope that one day his family situation will get better. For now, I encourage him to lean on those who love him for exactly who he is! And sadly, he isn't my only student in this situation.

We need to acknowledge that the Church as a whole has caused harm for the LGBTQ+ by exclusion, hate, and threats. I said a few minutes ago that members of the LGBTQ+ community have heard that “You need to change before you’re welcome” and “You’re going to hell.” I remember when I was scared of this, but also wanted to enjoy life. So, I concocted the plan that I would be with a man for most of my life and then I would “repent” and marry a woman. If I married a woman at the end of my life, God would allow me into heaven. Now how absurd is that! Please note that I no longer believe this!

We can also acknowledge how people have found Market Square Presbyterian Church a place of healing. So thank you Market Square for being the most loving people and being true children of God who follow Jesus’ teachings from Matthew 22:34-40 so well. Life on earth is short. Why do we want/need to fill it with hate? There really isn’t a need to make someone’s life miserable. Love thy neighbor as yourself. And love yourself! It is okay to be selfish and take time to work on yourself and figure out your needs. Everyone deserves to be loved and treated with the upmost respect. No one should feel unworthy – unworthy of someone’s love or being loved by others; unworthy of respect. Or they shouldn’t have to feel that they need to do a million things to show their love or receive God’s acceptance. God loves all of us – each and every one of us just as God created us to be. So, give yourself some slack – love yourself and love your neighbors. And let others love you!

RuPaul, who is the world’s top drag queen, closes every episode with these words, and that’s what I’m going to leave you with today. If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else? Can I get an amen?”

Amen!