

“A Generous Inclusivity”  
June 21, 2020

Exodus 36:1-9  
Mark 9:38-41

As I said during the announcements at the beginning of our worship today, our worship this morning and next Sunday—including the sermons—are connected, two parts of the same whole. The two services grow out of different and yet connected concerns. Both seek to address how we will live with each other and respect the image of God we find in all people. This morning the emphasis is on inclusion, next Sunday on freedom. One is not prior to the other. One is not a greater concern than the other.

It is not, as some might remind us, it is not a binary choice. Jesus even reminds us of the great reversal: the first will be last and that last will be first.

This was to be the weekend of the Iowa City Pride Festival—and it would mark a fifty-year celebration. A half century of Pride should be celebrated.

Of course, the pandemic took the festivities away from the streets and the Ped Mall and put it online.

I hoped to have one of our former members, the Rev. Raven Rowe, preach on this Pride Sunday. While she was eager to do this, sinus surgery a couple of weeks ago and a long recovery meant that was not to be. Raven did say: “Let the congregation know I love them and miss them, and that I am forever grateful for their love and support.”

When I knew that Raven wouldn’t be able to preach, I asked a few other members of our congregation if there were scripture lessons or hymns or anything else that should be included in worship this morning.

Courtney Rowe suggested the first lesson this morning—and she also expressed the same affection for this congregation as Raven did. Courtney brought her own keen theological insight to bear on this and this text is certainly not one that I would have thought of or imagined using on my own.

But in light of the Supreme Court decision last week, Courtney told me: “Exodus 36 might be an interesting choice, since the decision was about the right for LGBT people to work, and the passage is about people using their God given talents to make something holy and beautiful.”

This lesson is deep and encouraging. On the surface it is about the making of the Tabernacle—the portable sanctuary that the Hebrew people would carry with them during their time in the wilderness.

In the lesson we heard, Bezael and Oholiab are the key workers, but as chapter 35 makes clear, there are many more involved. And together they have the spirit, skill, intelligence,

and knowledge to do the work with which they are charged. In addition, they are able to teach others.

The result is not only great competence. Their ability also generates great generosity—so much so that the people are told: “Stop your giving! We have enough! We heard about what the UCC Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann called “generosity run rampant.” He adds what we have long known in this congregation: “Religion that is significant and sustaining costs money.”<sup>1</sup> We welcome the gifts of members and friends because what we are doing *is* significant and makes a great difference in the lives of many people.

We, too, have seen again in these days that generosity leads to generosity. And it’s not just money that is involved here.

It is a good thing to be generous with liberties and rights and to extend them to all so that all might prize those liberties and maintain those rights as we do here in Iowa—at least when we are acting at our best.

It was a good thing eleven years ago when the Iowa Supreme Court was generous and affirmed the right to marry was held by all people. It allowed many in this congregation to marry—increasing our joy, strengthening our work to extend the blessings of God to others, as we continued our faithful pursuit of justice for all.

It is a good thing to be generous with opportunity. So it was a good thing last week when the United States Supreme Court affirmed that all people should be protected from discrimination in the workplace so that all people can, as Courtney said, use “their God-given talents to make something holy and beautiful”—whatever that might be.

We know, of course, that such generosity, such liberality always faces opposition, which is why it’s important to rejoice and celebrate at times like this. We express our joy, we sing a little more, we let our prayers reflect our gratitude in these days so that we can gain strength and encouragement for the struggles ahead.

And we know that there will be new struggles.

Some of you will remember that we used to have a banner on the Jefferson St. side of our church building that told everyone: “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

It’s that great UCC message of hospitality and openness. Students and others walked by and slowed down as they read the message announcing to each person that this was a place for all people.

That lasted for a couple of weeks—and then someone tore down the banner.

That announcement of welcome was an unwelcome message to some. There are those who want churches to be places of exclusivity, places that draw the line between those on the inside and those on the outside, between the right and the wrong.

This suggests that for us as a congregation we need to continue to be clear about who we are, about what makes us unique. We say, “No matter who you are...you are welcome here.” The authenticity and distinctiveness of this congregation is found not in drawing some arbitrary line, but in the open generosity that we see revealed in Jesus Christ. This is the way that we seek to follow.

In these days, then, let us reconnect with the power of our heritage.

We continue to listen to the stories of faithful and not so faithful people recorded in scripture and somehow our lives as faithful and not so faithful people are touched, sometimes even changed.

In spite of the many times the Bible encourages the people of God to welcome strangers, we also have stories that show people taking just the opposite approach.

John comes running up to Jesus and proudly announces: “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and as he was not one of us, we tried to stop him.”

Whoever he was, this man John saw was the first “outsider.” He wasn’t following the established leadership of the church. And that was just too much for John to take.

The line had to be drawn somewhere—and this seemed to be a pretty good place.

So often in the church lines have been drawn in ways that exclude people.

Women were long excluded from positions of power and leadership.

African Americans were excluded from white churches.

LGBT people are still excluded from many congregations.

“We tried to stop him because he was not following us.” John didn’t even bother to find out his name. This unnamed “someone” was seeking to be faithful to the Jesus he had somehow come to know. And he comes up against that most difficult person—another follower of Jesus.

If John had it his way, the followers of Jesus might have been limited to those twelve original disciples. After all, they knew one another. They were familiar faces. And they all shared one thing in common: each of those followers had a pretty good *misunderstanding* about who Jesus was and what he was about in this world.

New people see things differently, do things differently. Their hopes and fears may be different from our own.

The line has to be drawn somewhere—right?

Jesus draws a line. But as usual, he doesn’t draw it where we would expect.

“No one who performs a miracle in my name will be able the next moment to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is on our side.”

Hear that again: “Whoever is not against us is on our side.”

Jesus urges us toward graciousness and generosity.

Jesus draws a line. He establishes a new and appropriate border. We aren't asked to remove all of our defenses, to be totally open to everyone and everything. Those who are “against us,” who would harm us, who would tear down or destroy the open and welcoming community that we seek to build should remain on the other side.

But while maintaining this border, we need to remember that those who aren't against us are for us—and welcome them.

Within the United Church of Christ we have often drawn the line in ways different from other churches.

In 1785 the all-white Congregational church in Granville , Massachusetts called the Rev. Lemuel Haynes as their minister. He was the first African-American ordained to Christian ministry in a mainline tradition.

In 1853 Antoinette Brown was ordained as minister of a Congregational Church in New York, making her the first American woman ordained into Christian ministry.

In 1972 the San Francisco Association of United Church of Christ ordained Bill Johnson, and we became the first denomination to ordain an openly gay person.

So it is important for us to know who we are. We are powerless to change ourselves and the world for the better if we are confused about what our community stands for.

Let the lines we draw be clear.

Let them also be easily crossed by all.

In this way, we can continue to tell the city, the university, and all who will listen: no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggeman, Exodus, NIB, vol. 1, pg. 961-963.