

Breaking Barriers

Mark 2:1-12

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Coming in through the roof is loud and it's messy.

Typical roofs of Jesus' time were constructed out of wooden beams placed across the walls, which were then covered with reeds and clay. It's described that it is possible to dig out the clay to lower someone through the beams, but it certainly would have been not just noticeable, but disruptive, to anyone sitting below¹.

I wonder what was going through the minds of all the characters in the room: The people who were crowded in... I'm sure that they might have been quite angry at the disruption; very concerned about the noise and the mess. The four friends – those determined, daring passionate, risk-takers – I expect that they encouraged one another. I wonder, did they take turns clearing out the clay, helping one another so no one got too tired? Or were they all working at the same time so their friend could get to Jesus even faster?

And Jesus, what were his thoughts? Was he curious? Startled? Prepared? Amazed? The one who was being carried and lowered in from the broken roof.... what might he have been thinking? I imagine he thought: "How incredibly fortunate I am to have friends such as these, people who so determined to bring me in to hear Jesus that they didn't let anything stop them. They broke the barriers... for me!"

I am indebted to Ralph Basui Watkins who wrote a commentary about this text in a venture called, "Queering the Gospel of Mark." It's part of a series being written by various authors who are engaging the text with the insight and revelations of the LGBTQ community.

He jumps right in by asking: Who is on the outside trying to get in? And, does the mainline church – do we – operate in a similar fashion as the gathering depicted in this text?²

He points out that our LGBTQ siblings have been marginalized and left outside. Wanting to press close to Jesus, our siblings have been kept out by judgment and criticism. They have faced hostility and intentional or apathetic disregard. "Thank God

the man on the margins had friends” he says. Because no one made space. No one moved out of the way. “They don’t even notice,” Watkins says, “the commotion or the state of the man who has to be lowered into the room.”

Jesus, however, notices. Jesus sees. And instead of delivering judgment, Jesus recognizes this man and the man’s friends.... the ones who had the faith to bring him to the meeting and make sure he had a way to get in.

Watkins says: “For the church to be the church that God desires it to be, those of us who call ourselves friends and allies to our LGBTQ siblings are going to have to make a way. We are going to have to tear the roof off the church.”

He does make it clear that “we’re not to get this story twisted. We’re not saying that our LGBTQ siblings need their sins to be forgiven, they are not sinners, there is nothing wrong with them but they are marginalized by the majority of our mainline churches. The church cannot claim to be the church of Jesus Christ if it does not live up to the liberative call of God and invite our LGBTQ siblings into the room just as God made them.”

Watkins continues, “The church is not the church until it invites, welcomes, integrates, affirms and supports marginalized people so they may take back their right to fully be. To fully be in the church, open and out.” “God calls the church to be like the four friends who brought the man on the margins to the center. He was dropped down in the center of the church, right next to Jesus and Jesus showed him love. God calls the church today to bring those on the margins to the center and show them love.”

I’ve spent a lot of time these two weeks thinking about the church and who is it in the LGBTQ community that we are still keeping out on the margins. Where are our growing edges? Where can we expand in openness and compassion? Where is it that we can do some work in tearing up the roof?

Most of my reading and exploration came from study and learning of those who are transgendered, or with gender difference. Maybe an umbrella term would be “gender variance.” I’m guessing most of you, like me, were enculturated into a world where two genders - male and female – were the norm. It’s been a binary world. You were born and you were declared one or the other. It was set. It was fixed. This is who you are and it defines from there how you will behave, the choices you are allowed to make, and how society perceives you and treats you.

Many of us, by the way, have had our experience of God defined by gender designation. God for most of us growing up, was a "he." God is Father. God is masculine. And our relationship with and our perception of God proceeds from there. It's been a long journey to discovering and using alternate and expansive language for God. We know the Scriptures describe God as a brooding hen, gathering chicks under her wing. God describes God's self as one who nurses her young. And yet, it still surprises me that in nearly every public prayer I have heard-- that is not the Lord's Prayer -- it still begins with people saying, "Father God" ...

We are discovering, in our culture, a greater awareness of human beings that is beyond binary designations or labels. We are becoming aware that human gender is much more diverse and complex than we had ever suspected or known. And it's a sermon for another time, how much our religious imagination can expand when we learn from our gender variant siblings, about the nature and names of God that they discover from their own experience.

For us at the present time, church, there's a new vocabulary we need to learn in order to be open and welcoming and affirming. We need to do this in order to honor and respect people who know themselves to be created by a God who loves diversity. Transgender, gender identity, the concept of being gender fluid -- someone who does not identify themselves as having a fixed gender, or of any particular gender -- these are words for the church to understand. As people whose very first words in scripture describe a Creator who speaks the world into being, we know that language comes first. Language identifies us and shapes us. And there are voices we need to hear as well, voices through whom God is speaking.

Let's say this first about language. In his book, *Transgender: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith*, author Justin Sabia-Tanis writes, "A critical component to welcoming the transgendered (and I would add, gender variant) is being intentional about attitudes, language, physical space, and programs." p. 115 He points out that the way we use language is one of the ways that "a congregation can explicitly or unconsciously create an atmosphere that conveys to transgendered/gender diverse people that [they] are not welcome there."³

In his book, he notes the very real fear of judgment that transgender people have of showing up in a church to begin with. And that "congregations that seek to be welcoming must think carefully about this fear that trans people bring to the community of faith."⁴

He continues with this observation: “In addition to the fears, discomfort, and lack of information that congregations bring to an encounter with transgendered people, a congregation’s actions and choices put up barriers, even if the barrier is created inadvertently.” “Language,” he notes, “is often a major issue.”⁵

“The most devastating aspect of this communication is calling transgendered persons by pronouns and names that do not represent their current gender presentation or identity. Such language can cause a great deal of pain and discomfort.”

I was consulting with another pastor about finding appropriate liturgy for worship today and she wrote that Catonsville Presbyterian must be really way ahead of their congregation on the use of appropriate pronouns for people, of identifying people by the pronouns they choose. Catonsville probably has no problem writing your gender pronouns on your name tags, she said. I’m sure you’ve seen what she is referring to. On a nametag it’ll say your name: Hello, I’m “Dorothy”. And then, below it I’d write: she/her as my chosen pronouns because I identify as female. For others it might be he/him, because they identify as male. Or they/them – for those who have a more fluid, or a both or neither identity as male/female. I was delighted to think that my colleague thought so highly of our church, assuming we’d mastered that particular social grace. But when I mentioned to this Ken, we both laughed because, as he said, “No. We can’t even get the congregation to Step One of *wearing* a name tag!”

Nevertheless, the issue is one of respect to address an individual in the way in which that person wishes to be addressed. Sabia-Tanis writes, “Everyone needs to be welcomed into the house of God, and we should learn enough about all persons who enter our communities to know how they see themselves and with which pronouns to address them.”⁶

I broached this subject with a member of our congregation, a young adult who identifies as trans. He wrote a very thoughtful and thorough full-page response and gave permission for me to share it. He wrote:

When you asked me my thoughts on how to explain the importance of pronouns to someone who is new to the concept of people transitioning (that is, moving from male to female, or female to male, or to a more gender inclusive awareness), or who struggles to understand why there is so much emphasis on pronouns, my mind immediately went to a conversation that I seem to have pretty regularly with people once they find out that I am gay and/or trans, as well as Christian. They ask: *What do you think about the way some people weaponize Christianity against gay and trans people? What’s it like being gay and trans in the church?*

Religious and spiritual people will often add in:

How can I make my place of worship or spiritual practice more inclusive and welcoming to gay and trans people?

I start off my answer with the thought that Christianity, as with other religious and spiritual belief systems, is built on love and respect for other living beings. Jesus, a very open-minded and inclusive figure, was quite clear on this. It stands to reason, then, that Christians should strive to be the same: welcoming, respectful, and loving to all.

He continues:

I know that's a simplistic way of thinking, because we all have our flaws. The topic of gay and trans anything in many places of worship can seem out of the question to the faithful, because it seems to go against thousands of years of practice. The speed with which things have changed in our society can make people's heads spin, and those who do not personally know someone who is openly gay or trans might wonder what the big deal is.

They might ask: Why can't we just focus on church/school/etc instead of someone's sexuality or gender? Or, so what if I use the wrong pronoun by accident? I'm sure they'll understand.

In parenthesis, he notes:

(In general we use pronouns in a surprisingly autopilot fashion. Even I'm surprised to this day when strangers express sensitivity in assuming my pronouns.)

Meanwhile, he continues, gay and trans people who have dealt with lifetimes of stares, derogatory remarks, and bullying will tell you that a pronoun is a basic unit of respect. It is the reason that assumptions about pronouns and names elicit such a deeply personal reaction.

Unfortunately, we live in such deeply polarized times in which we as a whole are suspicious and guarded around people we are not sure share our exact beliefs. It has been my own personal observation, he says, that many people of all walks of life *want* to be respectful, but they are not always sure how, and they are also not always sure how to ask. They fear making themselves vulnerable, and then being met with hostility if they ask something 'incorrectly' so they simply build a wall of hostility of their own. It's often easier to write someone off than to do the hard

work of putting aside your own ego to empathize, listen, and make allowances for 'meeting someone on their level.' This goes both ways, of course.

When we meet someone new, he points out, and ask their name, we don't then proceed to call them something else. Most people would agree that it would be strange at best, and disrespectful at worst, to do this. We take people at their word about their names --- how are pronouns any different?

He concludes:

Considering how we can build bridges with our neighbors is simply an important part of being in a church community, or really any community. Little things (such as using someone's preferred name and pronouns) that cost us nothing – and yet go so far in making someone's day better – in the end make us all richer. (Big emoji smiley face.)

(Amadeus Guchhait, email June 4, 2022)

Language. Pronouns. Words of care. Words of respect. We have much to learn and many ways to grow in our call to openness, affirmation and inclusion. Yet we have the Spirit of God that continues to open our hearts and hands and minds... and roofs and churches.

Let's go back to our text: to the crowded room, to the broken roof, to the allies, to the presence of a compassionate and loving Jesus. Ralph Basui Watkins concludes his exegesis of this story by telling the church: "We have a decision to make. Who do you want to be in this story? Do you want to be one of the four friends or do you want to be those who sit in judgement of what God is doing and has done?"

Friends, Catonsville Presbyterian Church, we know who God has called us to be: people of welcome, people of acceptance, people of openness and compassion, people who walk the way of Jesus Christ.

As we continue to learn and to grow in understanding and as we put new language and new ways into practice, let's do it guided by the example of Jesus. To be sure, we'll make mistakes. We'll sometimes say the wrong thing. We will apologize gracefully and move on, inspired to do better. We have a lifetime of habits to break. We have a culture that takes a lot of effort to move in a loving direction --- and as we've seen this week, sometimes it takes a turn backward and we've got to dig deep and dig hard for justice, inclusion, and basic human rights.

On this Pride Sunday, let's commit to go and break the barriers together.
Let's do it for love. In the end, it does make us all richer.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, you love all that you have created, and you celebrate the diversity of your creation. Throughout your history with your people, you have reminded us that those whom the world sees as the least are the greatest in your eyes. We ask that you give us the grace to celebrate with our gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse siblings as they choose to live authentically in the world. Teach us to honor and celebrate their gifts and help us to create a world in which gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse children, teens and adults are loved, accepted and celebrated in every gathering and every congregation. We ask this in your many names. Amen.

(Religious Institute, from UCC Open & Affirming Coalition
worship resources)

¹ Jewish Annotated New Testament, p. 74, Oxford Univ. Press, 2017, Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler

² Tear the Roof off This: Coming in from the Top; Justice Unbound, Queering the Bible series

³ Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Transgender: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith*, p. 115, WIPF & STOCK, Eugene, Oregon, 2018

⁴ Sabia-Tanis, p. 116

⁵ Sabia-Tanis, p. 119

⁶ Sabia-Tanis, p. 119-120