

“Identity of Grace”
Luke 8:26-39
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
June 19, 2016
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

Last week, we celebrated the 120th anniversary of Redwoods Presbyterian Church. It was a time of claiming what God has done for us as a church throughout the years, how we have been sustained through many transitions – physical, emotional, practical and spiritual. We celebrated how this church is a beloved place, and we celebrated our strengths. We celebrated our identity. Thank you to all of those who organized, presented and participated in these events last weekend. It is these celebrations that help us to embrace and claim our identity as a church, whose mission is, (as stated in our bulletin): to make known to all people the transforming love and power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, including all, excluding none; where we work for justice and peace among all people and to bring hope to those Jesus called the least of his brothers and sisters.

In the Gospel passage today, Jesus crosses over the Sea of Galilee to the Gerasenes, symbolizing that he is crossing not just the sea but also cultural boundaries. The Gerasenes was the land of the Gentiles, and most Jews would not set foot there, let alone bring along their entourage. Jesus is met by a man possessed by demons, or oppressed by demons as noted in some translations. The man has been living without clothes and without a house, he is forlorn, outcast, living among the dead in the tombs, wandering around the gravesites. In other words, the man is associating or identifying not with the living, but with the dead. Though the man is alive, living and breathing, he is not participating actively in his community. He exists on the margins of society.

Jesus commands that the unclean spirits come out of the man, and the man calls Jesus by the name, Son of the God Most High, and begs not to be tormented. Which is interesting, because the man seems to be already tormented. This makes me think of how when we are faced with change, it is uncomfortable, even if it for our benefit. Jesus asks the man his name, and the man answers, identifying himself by his demons – Legion, which is a division of the Roman army, numbering about 6,000. The man is crippled with demons, so many that they have literally taken over, and he cannot claim anything apart from that which possesses, or oppresses him.

The demons beg to be sent into a herd of pigs rather than the abyss, which is the home of the dead -- again, isn't that where the man already was? -- and Jesus allows this. The herd of pigs stampede into the lake and drown, and the demons are gone. The man is healed, he is free. This is not the end of the story, though.

The herdsmen are likely not too happy about seeing the source of their livelihood destroyed in one fell swoop, and they flee and tell everyone in the surrounding area

what has happened. When the people come and find Jesus, and the man once possessed or oppressed by demons sitting at his feet, they are afraid. This man, once without clothes and sanity is now clothed and in his right mind. The herdsmen tell the people how the man came to be healed, and the people are seized with great fear. They ask Jesus to leave, and he does.

The healed man asks to go with him, but Jesus tells him to return to his home and declare how much God has done for him. And the man does. The man, once without a home, is now home. He is whole. He has his identity back. He has reentered community. We are not told how the community responds. I would like to believe that they welcomed him, that they rejoiced with him, that they celebrated with him what God had done for him. That perhaps they saw what God was doing for them and their own community through the healing of this man.

Given the tragedies last week in the Pulse nightclub massacre of an LGBT community in Orlando, I am struck by the parallel themes of identity, freedom and fear. The man in the gospel passage is healed of his demons, and the people of the surrounding community are afraid.

The violence committed a year ago in Charleston demands that we address issues of racial discrimination. The violence committed last week in Orlando demands that we address issues of sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination.

The similarity I see in the Gospel story and our current issues around sexual identity is that during this month of Gay Pride, people are celebrating the freedom they have experienced from coming out of the tombs of secrecy, uncleanness, shame and death that they had previously experienced. Gay pride is about honoring one's true identity, one's true image of God within. This breakthrough to freedom in the LGBT community is threatening to some. Life as it was, the status quo, is changing, and this can be scary and uncomfortable.

Rev. Mark Wingfield, a Baptist pastor in Dallas, Texas, posted an article last month entitled, "Seven Things I'm Learning about Transgender Persons." It documented his realization that he didn't know much of anything about transgender issues and decided to learn, so that he could responsibly contemplate and contribute to the headlining discussions and concerns. He consulted a pediatrician and geneticist, medical professionals who have experience with the subject.

He discovered 7 major points that led him to a theological conclusion.

1. LGBT – the LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) describe sexual orientation, or whom we feel attraction to, and the T (transgender) describes gender identity, or whether we identify as male or female.

2. For the majority of humanity, male and female external physical anatomy correspond to whether a person is male or female. But for a small portion of humanity, the visible anatomical parts and the inner identity do not match up.
3. It is not infrequent that babies are born with ambiguous or incomplete sexual anatomy.
4. Transgender persons are not “transvestites.” “Transvestites” are people (typically men) who are happy with their gender but derive pleasure from occasionally dressing like the opposite gender.
5. Transgender persons are not pedophiles. The typical profile of a pedophile is an married adult male who identifies as heterosexual. There is zero statistical evidence to link transgender persons to pedophilia.
6. The typical transgender person wants desperately not to attract attention. All the publicity and talk of bathroom habits is highly disconcerting to people who have spent their lives trying not to stand out or become the center of attention.
7. Transgender persons are the product of nature, not nurture. According to medical science, chromosomal variances occur within moments of conception, and anatomical development happens within the nine months in the womb.

Rev. Wingfield concluded that if Christians really believe every person is created in the image of God, how can we condemn a baby who comes from the womb with gender dysphoria? He said his pediatrician friend puts it this way: “We must believe that even if some people got a lower dose of a chromosome, or an enzyme, or a hormonal effect, that does not mean that they got a lower dose of God’s image.”

Two weeks later, Rev. Wingfield wrote a follow-up commentary entitled, “Painful lessons from a pastor’s viral transgender post,” as his original post was read by more than a million people. He had communicated with over 400 people about the article, which he says were mostly positive and filled with emotion and gratitude and pain, from transgender persons, their parents and friends, and from clergy, doctors, teachers and counselors.

What he found from these correspondences was that most transgender people are not against God, they fear God is against them, or, more specifically, they believe the church is against them. Many of them grew up in the church and are people of deep faith, but they are people who have been asked not to come back, have been removed from membership, have been shunned, and their families have experienced this as well.

One person wrote to him, “You are a pastor from the most conservative, Bible-thumping part of the country. Your quiet words go a long way to helping those who have had no voice. ... I cry when writing this because of what you are doing and how

much it helps and means the world to me.” He received a letter from a single mom with 4 kids, one of whom is transgender, and the family was kicked out of their church. The mom asked him for help in finding another church in her city where they would be accepted. Another had been a deeply devoted Bible study leader in his church and was asked not to attend anymore after sharing gender identity struggles.

Rev. Wingfield reflects that perhaps the church of Jesus Christ is most known today for what it is against rather than who God is for. He considers that perhaps corporate America is doing a better job of addressing the essence of a person’s whole self than the church. Indeed, I read a letter sent to all employees of a large company this week, which read:

All of us have been horrified by the terrible tragedy that occurred in Orlando early Sunday morning.

In particular, the shooter’s stated objective of trying to harm the LGBT community is particularly unsettling at this time. June is Pride Month, a time when our company is pleased to join many other organizations in highlighting and celebrating the many contributions of LGBT people to the rich diversity we enjoy in this country.

Our sincere thoughts and prayers are with the families of the victims of the Orlando incident, as they are with families of all victims of terrorism. For employees who may be seeking guidance on how to make sense of the tragedy or to explain the situation to children, we recommend reviewing the attachments which were created by Aetna Resources for Living. In them, you can also find practical tips on how to take care of your health and maintain wellness at a time when our bodies and minds are under the stress people often feel in the aftermath of a terrorist incident.

Rev. Wingfield confessed in the original article that he didn’t know any transgender persons, or at least he didn’t think he did. Immediately upon publication, he began hearing from folks who said this: “I will be your transgender friend.” Tears came to his eyes as he read these lines over and over again and realized that he was hearing from strangers who were willing to open their lives to him in much greater proportion than they feared the church would be willing to open itself to them. He found himself weeping and shaken as he realized that the transgender community was being kinder to him than the church has been to them.

He said as a pastor, he’s pretty sure of this one thing: The story of Jesus is much more about who’s included rather than who is excluded. “For God so loved the world” includes everyone.

The man in the Gospel passage is free from what has possessed and oppressed him and he runs to proclaim this to the world. In essence, Jesus tells him: Go celebrate

your identity of grace. You are a beloved child of God. Claim it. By doing so, you will be inspiring others to do the same.

Last year during Gay Pride month, there was a letter to the editor in the local paper that asked of the LGBT community, "Why do you need a parade?" Just as we at Redwoods Presbyterian Church celebrated our 120th anniversary last week, Gay Pride allows those who have found, claimed and embraced their identity to celebrate it, as Jesus commands the healed man in the gospel passage to do.

We all, today, have our demons that tempt us to forget that we are beloved children of God. Can we, in this moment, put aside whatever it is that is impeding us from recognizing our true identities as images of God? Can we take a moment to feel in our bodies and souls, that we are adored and beloved by our Creator? I ask you to join me in taking a moment to close our eyes, breathe in deeply, and experience this love.

And now, let us share this love. Please turn to your neighbor, and say, "Never forget, you are a beloved child of God."

Amen.