

Sermon: Beyond Natural
Scripture: Galatians 3:24
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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The progressive Christian church must speak up and speak out for the sake of our transgender neighbors, friends, and family members because it's our sacred scriptures that are used and abused by our fellow Christians to condemn transgender people just as those scriptures and our churches have condemned homosexuals for so long. We know what compassion, mercy and love require of us but some of us believe we have to put the Bible aside or on hold or on the back burner in order to be accepting of variant expressions of gender identity and sexual orientation. But that is only because our conservative Christian siblings have been more vocal and forceful in promoting their interpretation of the Bible.

So we must speak up and speak out and read our Bible carefully to offer an alternative and possibly better and more faithful interpretation of the sacred texts, which I'll at least try to do this morning. And so towards that end we'll start at the beginning. Because when certain Christians raise a hue and cry against transgender people, this is where they begin – in the first chapter of Genesis. As Sarah Gallop just read in verse 27 it says, right there in black and white - "In the beginning God created humankind; male and female he created them." It's not until the second chapter that it describes woman being taken from man's side and here humankind is referred to as Adamah, which is prior to the division and is transgender, we might say, or beyond gender. Adamah,

does not necessarily mean male so much as “human made out of earth or ground.”

The other thing to note about this account is that it is quite clearly more poetry than it is history, more story than documentation and in the creation accounts of each day there is this beautifully poetic dualism that the writer employs speaking of the creation of light and dark, day and night, sea and dry ground, earth and sky, male and female. It would be ridiculous then to argue that there is only day and night because Genesis said so and that dawn or dusk or late morning or early evening are unnatural because there is only night and day. It would be irrational to argue that estuaries, river deltas or marsh lands are unnatural because in Genesis it only says that God made sea and dry ground.

So it follows that we can also say “yes, God made male and female” and the many and sundry subtle variations in between that 2 gender identities. Like dawn and dusk and estuaries and deltas not only is it “natural” but those in-between places and states and people are beautiful in their uniqueness and touch the heart in ways that the normal ole night and day, sea and sky, male and female can’t.

It is for the sake of ease and the limitations of our brains that we feel the need to place single words on realities that are multivariate. But let us not mistake our doing with God’s doing! God gave us this expanse of color and light variation and movement of time, subtleties of shade and shadow, angles of light and splashes of textures that reflect and absorb... and we get in our cars and head off to work and say “yep, it’s day. It was night now it’s another day.” And God must be like “but...look at this moment!” And we pass a woman and a man and a masculine woman or a feminine man or a person who looks outwardly

like a man but knows herself differently from that and another who falls somewhere else on this remarkable spectrum of what it means to be human and we say callously – “there’s a man and there’s a woman and not sure about them but they’ve gotta be one or the other!” And I just imagine that God’s like “but...look, and the beautiful variety!” Poor God, who worked so hard on this creation and continues to sustain and create it in all its marvelous complexity and we just want it to make better sense!

But that’s what our minds do, at least our Western minds do, to simplify and frame things in nice neat dualistic categories, which is actually NOT the way God made our world. More and more we are coming to realize in the modern scientific world what the world’s great spiritual traditions have always taught - that there is an inherent unity and wholeness to the complexity of reality that is truer than the dualities that our minds impose upon it. Male-female, physical-spiritual, material-immaterial, good-bad, in-out, is all suspect for framing reality. Back to Genesis - the sin of Adam and Eve eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not that they disobeyed God and gained more knowledge than God wanted them to have but that they began imposing their human dualistic mind on reality. From then on they saw everything too dualistically as good and evil, physical and spiritual, pure and impure, holy and unholy, natural and unnatural, male and female. And God was like “uh oh!”

The spiritual journey then, the trajectory of human spiritual growth, is about coming to a consciousness of the deeper hidden wholeness and the Heart at the ground of reality and the beautiful nuanced complexity of existence.

So the emerging of open and public voices and perspectives of transgender people is one small place where we can have our mind opened to this hidden wholeness and this beautiful complexity of human life that we too narrowly and anemically have define in only 2 genders. For a long time now we have been noting and challenging gender scripts that limit and do damage to our experience of life – boys don't cry, girls are thin, men earn the money, women keep the house, males are aggressive, women are demure, assertive men are powerful, assertive women are bitchy, and so on and so forth...each of these doing damage to the variety and expanse of human experience. But we see now that these are cultural scripts that we impose on reality. We say, "it's just the nature of things", but no it's the nature of how we have defined things... in fact not a general "we" but rather it's how the powerful and privileged of our culture have defined things. What a gift that we are beginning to face this and come to clearer terms with God's reality itself. We should be thanking our transgender friends for lifting us up and beyond our naturally narrow understanding of what exactly God created when God created us as human beings!

This was also really clearly one of the experiences that the first Christians had when they were coming awake and coming newly alive and finding a sudden expanding of their souls through the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus. They found quite clearly that the narrow dualisms of their minds would not hold at the level of the soul. So the Apostle Paul offered a new teaching based upon this broader and truer picture of reality:

When people said there were the Jews here and Gentiles there. Paul said, Not in Christ!

And when people said that there were free people here and there were slaves there. Paul said, not in Christ!

When people believed that there were the favored rich and the despised poor. Paul said, not in Christ there aren't!

When they said the pure are here and the impure over there. Paul said - not in Christ, no!

Well, at least, they said there are males here and there are females there. And Paul said, write it down, NOT IN CHRIST!

In Christ there are no Jews and Gentiles, free and slave, male and female, there is only the human being in all its beautiful complexity loved by God, redeemed by Christ, united in the Holy Spirit.

The revelation that came to us through Jesus is that we are not who we think we are. We are not the categories and distinctions that we use to place ourselves culturally. We are not first male or female but our essence is something deeper than that. Who I truly am and who you truly are resides well below the incidentals of our bodies or our position or our race. All of that is natural but the human being is in this unique place in creation where we are natural, of nature, but called also beyond the natural. To hear our transgender neighbors say – something about this my body doesn't match this my heart and soul - should not be met with resistance instead Christians - of all people - should say “yes, of course, I get that! There is a brokenness in our nature that Christ came to redeem and that we are called to participate in redeeming with him. Redeem away!”

In closing, I just want to leave you with one more point. Remember when Jesus' anger is kindled against the money changers in the temple and he loses it and overturns the tables? In that dramatic

episode, Jesus quotes from his own scriptures, from the prophet Isaiah and yells “Is it not written my house will be called a house of prayer for ALL people!” Well, it’s worth noting where exactly Jesus pulls that quote.

He takes it from chapter 56 of Isaiah when Isaiah writes against the practice that kept Eunuchs out of the temple and out of covenant with God. Eunuchs are castrated males, who were not uncommon in their society. Whether they who were born that way or it happened in war or they intentionally had external genitalia removed to be closer to God, they were understood as beyond gender. But to the temple exclusion of them, to the law that condemned them, Isaiah proclaims “for thus sayeth the Lord unto the Eunuchs that choose the sabbath and the things that please me, I will give in my house and within my walls a place for them and a name better than that of sons and daughters. I shall give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off, even them I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer! For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Isaiah 56:4-7 And it’s that passage that Jesus pulls out to challenge what was happening in His house of prayer, that passage to say don’t put anything before the well-being of God’s beloved children, not economics, not religious dogma, not politics, nothing must compromise the dignity and worth of the human soul. May this be true of our house of prayer as well.