Wondrous Variety

Luke 6:36-45 Kimby Young

Mark 12:28-31 July 28, 2024

God loves wondrous variety. My sermon title for today is a line from an old movie – one of the Robin Hood movies. Morgan Freeman was a Muslim who lived an honorable friendship with Robin Hood – enemies become friends. In one scene a child came up to the character Morgan Freeman portrays and said, “Why is your skin dark?” He answers, because “Allah loves wondrous variety.” Then the camera pans around a group of very diverse people dancing and celebrating. God loves wondrous variety. The Creator of the universe loves, absolutely loves variety, diversity, creativity, and difference. The evidence of that is how God created humans in such remarkable variation and uniqueness – with so many gifts and so much potential.

This sermon is controversial and it has been the hardest for me to write for a variety of reasons. Because this is a difficult topic to cover in 15 minutes, because there is no chance in a worship service for questions and discussion, and because I’m aware there are young people in the room and this is a PG topic that requires sensitivity. On the other hand in a series about why Presbyterians do what we do, why Presbyterians are sometimes misunderstood, this is one of the most important and misunderstood topics – why we are inclusive of extreme diversity. And specifically of why Presbyterians welcome and include people of diverse sexual orientation, identity and gender.

So I am going to start with a very direct answer. The Presbyterian Church welcomes and includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and other people without restriction or limitation, because we believe God does. The reason some people do not is because they believe there is sinfulness involved. The Presbyterian Church does not believe it is sinful to be glbtq. We believe mistranslations of scripture and mistakes in history have led to misunderstandings. We also believe we don’t have to agree with each other to be faithful. If you don’t agree with what I say today, please don’t leave or get mad. Please talk to me outside of worship. We are meant to listen to each other. We are meant to try to understand.

Here is the key. We may disagree. We may have different opinions and experiences – not just about this topic but about many issues. But we are called to listen to each other and to love. We cannot know someone else’s experience of God. We cannot judge someone else. I can’t know if you are right with God or not. It is up to each person to have a personal relationship with God, to live their best faithfulness and to listen for God’s guidance. Yes -We are meant to help each other and encourage one another. We are meant to live in community. But it is not for me to decide if your relationship with God is faithful. It is not for me to judge you, nor for you to judge me. It **is** my job to love you. To love as God loves. To encourage your faithfulness to God. It is my job to be faithful and grow in my own relationship with God. And if possible to help others to grow in God’s love.

When you use scripture to beat someone else up, you are misunderstanding and misusing scripture. When you use scripture to hurt someone or to judge someone else, then you are making a mistake. Scripture should never be used to hurt someone else – only to heal and make whole. Scripture is intended to encourage and to guide. Scripture is intended to help us love God and love others, as Jesus said.

By the way, Jesus never talked about these issues – about homosexuality and related issues. Jesus talked a great deal about love and power and money. But Jesus never talked about same gender marriage. Jesus talked about honor and respect, responsibility and care. Jesus talked so much about love, forgiveness, acceptance and welcoming others to God’s presence. We honor Jesus by doing the same.

I decided not to read the 7 or 8 scripture verses that are used to justify stands against homosexuality. Outside of worship I will talk with you about the specifics if you wish. I’ll teach a class if there is enough interest. In most cases these scripture passages are one of two things. One, Old Testament prohibitions, or two, mistranslations. These Old Testament prohibitions, mostly in Leviticus, no longer apply because Jesus replaced the detailed law with the grace of redemption through his actions on the cross. These prohibitions include - don’t get tatoos or piercings of skin, don’t wear any make up, don’t cut your hair, don’t trim your sideburns, don’t wear fabric made from two different animals, don’t eat shellfish, and don’t eat milk and meat together. (There goes the cheeseburger.) Most of us don’t keep those other old prohibitions. We know they no longer apply after Jesus, although we understand their importance at the time they were given. They were meant to separate the Israelites from other cultures and to keep them safe. God wanted and still wants to keep people safe. But most Christians don’t believe we need to honor those Old Testament prohibitions taken out of context.

The other few verses that seem to prohibit homosexuality today are frankly mistranslations. From Greek or Hebrew to Latin to English we made mistakes in translating, and the culture of the day defined the way words were translated. Especially the translations in the 16th and 17th centuries were culturally biased and made mistakes. In most cases the actual original words prohibited are prostitution, promiscuity and perversity. Perversity is not clearly defined. But almost always it was about some person taking advantage of another weaker person. Language is so different. We have to try to understand what was meant, what was the intent.

And what does it mean for us today? What is God’s intent for us today? How should we live God’s love today? For me it always comes back to love. Our scripture from Mark that is repeated several times in the Bible – love God and love others. That is our clear call. What is the most loving way to live in the world today? I don’t think it is about deciding who is right and who is wrong. I don’t think it is about dividing me from you and us from others. I don’t think we are supposed to decide who gets to God and who doesn’t. God welcomes everyone. God makes the path to heaven, we are supposed to help others find the way. Whatever that means for you. The Presbyterian Church has decided to tear down as many barriers as possible and to build as many bridges. We are open, affirming, welcoming, diverse and inclusive. We invite people to be with us as we try to walk with God. Together we try to figure out what it means to be with God – to love God, to serve God, to love other people, all other people. Admittedly, we are still trying to figure all that out. Remarkably, God loves us immensely while we are trying. God loves us with amazing, transforming, life giving, abundant and restorative grace. God loves us. God loves you. God loves all. Thanks be to God.