

June 2 2024 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today is Gay Pride Day. There are a number of events in Downtown Santa Cruz, and Trinity will have a booth right next to the Aptos Methodist Booth. LGBTQ+ rights are very much a church issue. The Presbyterian Church only recently extended full privileges, affirming Open Ordination in 2010 and Marriage Equality in 2012. Just last month, the United Methodist Church voted to lift the ban on ordaining gays. This is a live topic with a long history. Trinity has always been a pioneer in this area. We ordained an openly gay individual many years ago, violating denominational law. We also supported AIDS victims with food and care in the eighties when they were often alienated and exiled.

What makes a community of faith accepting of others? What makes them inclusive or exclusive? Part of the story is found in today's gospel. The Sabbath law forbade certain types of activities during a Sabbath, which included food gathering and healing.

Jesus clearly believed that when people were hungry, they needed to be fed, and when they were sick, they needed to be healed, based on the hungry or hurting person's situation, not societal boundaries. Here the disciples are plucking grain while walking through a field. This action was legal under Mosaic law but was not legal to do so on the Sabbath. The Pharisees (who clearly were not lacking the means to get food) complained. One commentary asked, "What were the Pharisees doing out in the fields anyway on a Sabbath?" They wanted to spy on others. When Trinity ordained an openly gay individual, a pastor from another church complained to Presbytery. Strange? But to a legalistic individual, security comes from an ordered society in which they are in power, driven by laws they interpret and use to control others. Jack Rogers wrote a history of the gay and lesbian debate in the churches. In his book, he mentions that it parallels the debates on slavery and on women's rights. Free whites in the church claimed that the Bible clearly justified slavery, and men in the church made a Biblical case for the subordination of women. More recently, straight individuals have constructed a Biblical case for the exclusion and subordination of LGBT people.

You might ask, how can two sides in the church see issues so differently? One reason is power dynamics; those in power want to stay in power. The other is demonstrated by the second half of this morning's passage. "Jesus enters the synagogue again," it says, "on the Sabbath." There was a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees knew Jesus could and would heal the man, but it was against the Sabbath law. So Jesus directly challenges them. He asks, "Is it right to do good or evil on the Sabbath, to save life or destroy it?" They did not answer, and Jesus was grieved due to their hardness of heart. They were past caring for others. They had set boundaries not only on people unlike them but on God. Jesus asked the man to step right out in the middle of everybody, and He healed him. What a joy for that man. But the Pharisees sought out the Herodians in order to kill Jesus. Some people would rather kill than lose control. Jesus then hammers the message home, saying, "The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath. The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Jesus consistently treated people with respect. When Jesus healed people, he also released them from the margins and brought them out of the shadows. When he healed lepers, he directed them to, "Go show yourself to the priest." Why? Because a leper was not just ill, he was alienated. He was a leper who happened to be a person. Jesus sees human beings as people who happen to be sick, hurting, lonely, unhoused, or gay, and he includes us. My mentor, Bill McCord, was discussing this issue with me, and much to my shame, I was on the fence. He said, "Larry, in the Marines at the Yalu River, one of the bloodiest battles of all time, there was a Marine in our group who was gay and was alienated from others. During the heat of battle, he crossed over several hundred meters of open and dangerous territory, carrying back the dead and wounded, multiple times." Then Bill challenged me, "Larry, people are people. Get with the program."

In the first part of this passage, Jesus said that David's men were hungry, so they ate holy bread. Aren't we all hungry for a world where all people are respected members of the family of God and all are invited to a supper at the Lord's table, which, when all are welcome, is truly a holy supper? Of course!