



Trinity Sunday, Year B

Condemnation Is Not The Point

Many Christians quote John 3:16 as an affirmation of God's love and then condemn those who are not heterosexual. John 3:17 explains God's aim in John 3:16: God's desire to love and save the whole world.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"God's love is an act of giving that seeks to bring us freedom." Michael Joseph Brown



"When we liberate ourselves through our acceptance of God's love, we can transform the world." Shonda Jones



"God desires all of us to be part of the family." Bridgette Young

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in **John 3:1-17** takes place following the confrontation in the Temple, as well as the images of a father and his beloved son. Here we hear of Moses' brazen serpent in the wilderness and most pointedly of "things above" and "things below." These are figures in a language of signs that point to the divine mystery of God's rule. Literalism, represented by Nicodemus' responses, does violence to Jesus' language of signs -- destroying evocative language for inadequate wooden theological propositions.

The passage then contains a play on the word *hypsōō*, to "lift up" (verse 14). Jesus describes God's command to Moses to "lift up" the serpent in the wilderness and juxtaposes that to the "lifting up" that is in store for Jesus. The passage makes little sense without the background story from Numbers 21:4-9. In that narrative, the people became impatient on their way from slavery to freedom. Still in the wilderness after their departure from Egypt, and despairing of being able to survive in a land with no food and water, they complained against God and Moses. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food" (Numbers 21:5).

As a consequence of their complaining, terrible serpents appeared, bit the people, and killed them. When they were repented, God told Moses to make a serpent and set it on a pole so that anyone who had been bitten might look at it and live. God's instruction to put the serpent "on a pole" may be understood as meaning that the serpent was to be used as, or turned into, a symbol to the people rather than directly affecting a cure. The bronze serpent is not a talisman but a symbol that signifies the grace of God. To insist on literal interpretations of the words of Jesus is futile. Nicodemus makes this mistake (John 3:1-4).

Coming out of slavery into freedom is often paradoxical. You would think that individuals who had once been oppressed would revel in the unbounded opportunity that freedom grants. What is more often the case, however, is that newly freed individuals struggle with the meaning of their own freedom. Having lived so long in a land among a people — but not positively belonging to the land or the people — creates a lived experience of dissonance. To put it another way, "Something just ain't right."

You don't quite know if you belong, and, if so, how you belong. You then carve out a niche for yourself that forms your identity, but that identity is an active resistance to the dominant reality that oppresses you. So you must have a Negro national anthem that stands in resistance to the dominant national anthem in order to live out the dissonance of a negative belonging. So instead of the "rockets red glare," you sing, "God of our weary years God of our silent tears." And even when you share the same language — or the same religious structure — it does not indicate in its deep structures that you share the same meaning. In other words, although we may occupy similar structures, sing many of the same songs, use familiar terminology and participate in much of the same practices, it does not signify that we share the same experience. Oppression

creates a dissonance even in the language that we use to describe our experience.



When has the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender experience of oppression created a situation in which we oppress ourselves?

LGBT people know what oppression feels like. They have developed mechanisms to cope in that land of injustice. LGBT people know how to negotiate the topography of that land. Even if it is uncomfortable, it is familiar to us. And yet, when what we pray for comes — when freedom comes — we don't know that land. We don't understand its topography. And so, instead of fully enjoying our freedom, we run the risk of becoming impatient with it. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, newly freed people may complain because the freedom becomes too much for them. It is an awesome and frightening paradox. What offers life to us may become unbearable to us. We may begin to yearn for the oppression that we left behind, and even the new nourishment of freedom tastes bitter compared to the now sumptuous meal of oppression.

And so, out of fear we can mimic our oppressors, thereby re-oppressing ourselves. It has been a long-time-coming, this movement from slavery into freedom. An unfortunate byproduct of this journey may be a tendency to resist living out our freedom from oppression. We should not desire to achieve status at the expense of true freedom. This is the kind of freedom that Paul points to in **Romans 8:12-17**. Paul's main argument here is that the "Spirit is life" for the person of faith (verses 12-13).



How do we experience life in the Spirit even when others try to oppress us?

The central verse in this passage from the gospel of John is perhaps the best-known Bible verse in the world. John 3:16 shows up in many public places. Hand-painted on posters, etched on jewelry, and totally isolated from this passage, "For God so loved the world . . ." has become emblematic of the central message of the Christian faith. This centrality is not undeserved. The power of this verse, however, is enhanced when it is read carefully and in context. The "so" is often misunderstood. The Greek *houtos* means "so" in the sense of "just so," or "in this way," or the more archaic, "thusly." We could translate the verse as "For in this way God loved the world that God gave his only Son, in order that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 is not about how much God loved the world, although that too is embedded in the statement. It is, primarily, about in what way God loved the world.

Most important in this verse is that God loved the world. God deeply loved the world that God had created, and God longs for this creation to live — to live in its fullness and authentically. It is not only some subset of people — who describe themselves as God's own people — whom God will save, as in the Numbers story. Paul, again, points out this new freedom with its holistic overtones. The apostle is affirming that human salvation is assured because it ultimately

depends not on human will and power but on God (Romans 8:14-17). It is the entire world that God has loved, precisely by having given God's only Child. As Jesus says, "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." God loved by having given the chosen Child, a non-coercive act that sets in motion a series of consequences.



Can you name one or more ways that God's act of giving God's Child can bring about life-affirming consequences?

Our God is not disinterested. God does not sit back watching us without getting involved in our day to day, even moment to moment, actions. The purpose of God's having sent the chosen Child was to save the world, just as the purpose of commanding Moses to erect a serpent was to save the people from death. The Son came to save, to open up the possibilities of freedom — abundant life — to us because God loved the world. That was Jesus' announcement. You want to know your purpose? You want to know why you are here? We are here because God loved. And we continue to be here because God continues to love.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Dear God, we desire to accept your love in Christ Jesus.
Help us to recognize that your gesture of love was
for the benefit of all humanity, not just an authorized portion of it.
Help us to see that your words are evocative and not literal,
symbols of your desire to free us into living authentic lives. Amen.*

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11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 6), Year B

God's Unexpected People With Unexpected Results

We often look to outward appearances to make judgments about God's will and its results, but today's passages remind us that God works through unexpected means for unexpected results.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 and Psalm 20 or Ezekiel 16:22-24 and Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, \(11-13\), 14-17; Mark 4:26-34](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Kingdom-building and the liberation it brings come through the agency of ordinary people." Shonda Jones



"God's realm often surprises us because we look for its in-breaking based on our own fallible judgments." Michael Joseph Brown



“The salient theme that runs through today’s texts is that God functions through surprises.” Bridgette Young

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The parable of the sower, Mark 4:1-9, is the interpretive prism through which we understand the following shorter parables that directly proceed as **Mark 4:26-34**. The “lamp” (verse 21) as the earlier “seed,” would become useful once what is hidden has been disclosed, once what is secret has been revealed. In one way it is telling us that the act of “coming out” allows us not only to be the men and women we are, but also that our “coming out” is a witness to others, allowing God’s will to work through our agency. With the parable of the sower there is a word of judgment, since inactive participants can jeopardize what they have. It is a word of challenge to simplistic notions that the human dimension in the work of God’s realm is unnecessary, an idea that is echoed in Ezekiel 16:22-24.

More directly to our passage, the parable in Mark 4:26-29 oddly de-emphasizes the human dimension. Instead, the realm of God grows automate (“of itself”). An analog may be found in the surprise Frederick Douglass, enslaved at the time, sensed when he heard of the development of an abolitionist movement. Something similar occurred during the Stonewall riots where a common police action sparked a gay liberation movement that has been changing the landscape of the United States ever since. As Jesus tells the story, the seed grows “[the sower] knows not how” (Mark 4:27).

The next parable provides a description of the “mustard seed,” symbolic of God’s realm or the Jesus movement, a struggle that would become significant in comparison to its origins. In **1 Samuel 15:34-16:13** we get the story of the anointing of David as king of Israel. David did not outwardly appear to be “king” material, but he was the one who God desired. In light of what has transpired in the American context, for example, one would never have imagined a liberation struggle that began with a few escaped slaves would lead to insurrections followed by – an abolitionist movement, the Civil War, the Reconstruction era, the Harlem Renaissance, a civil rights movement and finally to the election of an African American president. God’s realm, which promises us liberating freedom, can surprise us by becoming large enough “that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (Mark 4:32). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith are encouraged by this parable to look at the surprising results that can transpire from even miniscule events.



Who would have imagined that a riot in 1969 would result in the first Gay Pride parade in 1970 to the establishment of the Human Rights Campaign in 1980 to the success of same-sex marriage in five states today? Do you and how might you see God's hand in these actions?

The end of the passage from the gospel of Mark is a summary that focuses on why Jesus tells stories as his main mode of instruction. Like the Negro spiritual, the parable is not for those on the "outside." University of Chicago theologian, Dwight Hopkins, says, "Black folk related to one another in a religious cultural medium that befuddled the normative white English and circumvented standard (white) expressions" ["Slave Theology in the 'Invisible Institution,'" in Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, eds, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 16.].



What kind of "insider" language does the LGBT community have? What are examples of such language?

In today's epistle reading from **2 Corinthians 5:6-17**, the apostle Paul makes explicit that contrary to some notions of faith, faith does not deny the reality of pain, hardship and suffering. Instead, faith declares that the present reality is not the final reality. Oppressed African Americans were more than aware of this when they sang, "I got shoes, you got shoes; all God's chil'en got shoes. When I get to heaven, I'm gonna put on my shoes and walk all over God's heaven." Shoes were a metaphor for freedom, particularly freedom from want, because slaves were denied shoes. Those who sang this song and songs like them understood that their present reality of oppression was temporary and outside of God's will for human beings. God's will pressed for a place where those who were oppressed would walk the streets, no longer barefoot or even in work boots but wearing shoes. It was this future hope that kept them from losing heart. As **Psalms 20:6** tells us, "Now I know God will help God's anointed, and will answer from God's holy heaven with mighty victories by God's strong hand" [*The New Century Psalter*, Burton Throckmorton and Arthur Clyde, eds, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999)].

Faith points ahead to a future yet fulfilled. It provides a confidence of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1). It is this assurance that God works to make things better in the future that enables one to live with confidence in the present. It is important to realize that living with confidence in the midst of suffering is not equivalent to passively accepting oppression and waiting for some sort of "pie in the sky."

American slave masters often encouraged slaves to passively accept their plight and its horrible oppression on the promise that they would be rewarded in the afterlife. The idea that one's present reality was not the final reality, however, not only empowered the oppressed not to lose heart and to endure with a sense of dignity, but also enabled them to resist their current reality.

Confidence that a better reality was part of God's unfolding future was based on an understanding of God's vindication of Jesus, who lived and died resisting oppression. Faith in God and belief that freedom is God's will empowered them to work and fight on behalf of the divine will, praying as Jesus taught, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).



Can you name some of the things around you that indicate the advent of God's will on earth?

The LGBT life has always been about using faith to endure and overcome hardship. In his book *Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King Jr. describes this kind of faith when he writes, "Our refusal to be stopped, our 'courage to be,' our determination to go on 'in spite of,' reveal the divine image within us. The man who has made this discovery knows that no burden can overwhelm him and no wind of adversity can blow his hope away. He can stand anything that can happen to him" [Martin Luther King, Jr, *Strength to Love*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1981), 94].

For a fourth time in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul condemns the church's focus on outward appearances and emphasizes living for God out of a sincere heart and a pure conscience (2 Corinthians 1:12; 2:17; 4:3). According to the apostle, he was not concerned with gaining praise or admiration for himself. He was not concerned with trying to impress others. Followers of Christ, he argues, live on behalf of Christ, which means allowing the love of God manifested in Christ to compel a life in service to others and not in judgment of others based on outward appearances.

Traits, characteristics, lifestyles, and appearances valued and highly esteemed by society caused the Corinthians to embrace the message of Paul's opponents. Paul's own traits, characteristics, and appearances — which were not valued by society — caused the Corinthians to despise Paul and his ministry. Yet, the apostle counters, life in Christ represents a new creation.



How has or might the notion of a "new creation" been used against same gender loving people to argue for their need to deny who they really are?

For Paul, the reconciliation of all humanity to God is the central goal of this new creative act. This means that in the new creation self-centeredness and judgment based on external appearances no longer exist. It is this new creation that Dr. King envisioned when he proclaimed, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" ("I Have a Dream").

What may bind the epistle reading and the gospel reading from Mark together is the unexpected and dramatic nature of God's activity. God's realm comes through agents of change that (outwardly at least) appear inconsistent with the surprising outcome. LGBT individuals may appear to others as the mustard seed (something seemingly incapable of producing such impressive results), but the realm comes through such people. Paul reminds us that discipleship more frequently than not involves enduring hardship. Yet, he offers hope because, like Paul himself, someone who appears to others as incapable of ushering in God's realm is precisely the individual God chooses to empower.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Dear God, make us unexpected agents of change for the world around us.
Remind us that faith is not remaining content with the way things are,
but catching your vision of the way things can be.
Give us courage in the present.
Empower us to speak when the odds appear against us.
And grant that we may see the surprising results that can come about
when unexpected people bring about unexpected transformation.
Amen.*

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12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 7), Year B

Who are you...Really?

The question of identity is frequently at the center of debates on sexual orientation. Today's passages invite us to explore what it means to be who we are and how we live out our identity in community.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23\) 32-49 and Psalm 133; 1 Samuel 17:57-18:5, 10-16 and Psalm 9:9-20 \(used in this week's commentary\); 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"There is an audacity in being who we are. God calls us to such audacious discipleship." Shively Jackson



"Vulnerability and sharing who we are is part of the process of reconciliation." Shonda Jones



“Revealing who we are can bring about great fear, but it also provides an opportunity for great blessing.” Michael Joseph Brown

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In **Mark 4:35-41** a nature miracle leads to a question about Jesus' identity. Healings and exorcisms did not raise issues of identity, because healers and exorcists were not uncommon in Jesus' time. Even the disciples are given the authority to cast out demons in 6:13. By contrast, an individual who could command nature “the wind the sea,” would demand particular attention. At that time, people thought that such authority over nature, especially something as unpredictable and uncontrollable as water, was unique to God (Psalm 89:9). The term “rebuke” — reserved elsewhere in Mark for places of spiritual dissonance (see Mark 1:25; 9:25; cf. 8:32-33) — suggests that this is some sort of “spiritual” conflict.

Interestingly in the gospel of Mark, Jesus reserves nature miracles only for his close followers. People in the “other boats” were apparently unaware, although they too experienced the storm. Why? An answer is not readily apparent. It may have something to do with Jesus' earlier commands to silence. Jesus is not willing to reveal his true identity to many.

Jesus' ability to command natural forces brings about a condemnation of the disciples, whose lack of faith becomes apparent. Among the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, the sharpest conflict between Jesus and the disciples occurs in Mark. Only in Mark is the disciples' question so harsh. They exclaim, “Teacher, do you not care . . . ?” Also, only in Mark does Jesus charge the disciples with having “no faith,” as opposed to “little faith” in Matthew (see Matthew 8:26). The central question of the passage appears to be: if Jesus' closest followers misunderstand who he is, how will others ever understand him?

Far too often we become the prisoners or victims of the perceptions of others. When we do something unexpected — something we are not supposed to be capable of doing — conflict usually follows. This is indicated in the gospel text from Mark by the disciples' response: they are filled with great fear (a literal rendering of the Greek of the passage). The preacher Otis Moss highlights this well in his sermon, “Going from Grace to Dignity,” when he says, “I see a black and white parallel here. As long as we were struggling in the cotton fields of Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi with our cotton sacks across our shoulders and to our sides, picking cotton and having our fingers burning from stinging cotton worms that would hide under the cotton leaves; as long as we were barefoot, actually and symbolically, laughing when we were not tickled . . . America was satisfied . . . But one day America saw us marching to the voting booth, sitting down at lunch counters, and all of America became afraid.”

Something similar, it can be argued, has happened with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in the United States. As long as we remained in the closet, hiding our identities, pretending to be “confirmed bachelors” and such, “America was satisfied.” Like Jesus, when LGBT people begin to reveal their identities, take command of the circumstances around them, act out of the authority and dignity given them by God, then they may see those around them — even those closest to them — respond with great fear.



When has simply being “out” as LGBT people conjured up fear among others? What is the evidence and results of such fear?

By contrast to the Gospel reading, the story from **1 Samuel 17:57-18:5** speaks of the love that can develop between two individuals, even those of the same gender, when one individual accepts another for who he or she is. Jonathan’s love for David is renowned. Many have suggested that the description in the Bible is a sanitized presentation of their relationship. Whatever the true nature of the relationship between Jonathan and David, the story does remind us of what is possible when people move past the fear that can often accompany a “miraculous” deed, such as killing a great warrior like Goliath.

In **2 Corinthians 6:1-13** the apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthians to “widen your hearts also” (6:13). Paul cites Isaiah 49:8 in 6:2 to associate reconciliation with salvation. Salvation is not merely about individual deliverance. It is about communal reconciliation. Through Christ’s ministry of self-denial for the well-being of others, God is reconciling the entire world — all of humanity — and not merely individuals. He uses the passage from Isaiah to emphasize both the urgency of the situation and the present rather than the future nature of salvation.

Repeatedly in this letter, Paul challenges the cultural values the Corinthians appear to esteem. Throughout, Paul criticizes his opponents for advancing themselves and claiming apostolic authority based on outward signs of power and glory. He implies that ministries that claim divine authority based on appearances of success are flawed and can prevent access to salvation.

This should cause us to question the validity of some of the most popular Christian movements in the United States. Having thousands of followers is not the same as having validity in ministry, nor does “numbers of followers” point to words of reconciliation when the words are those of division. LGBT persons should rightly question the authenticity of Christian churches, organizations, and para-church ministries that claim authority — in the name of Christ — to oppress and silence those whom they deem to be less than human. This is not to say that sincere persons of faith cannot disagree. However, absolute certainty has never been the mark of a Christian understanding of revelation. As the theologian, Schubert Ogden, has said quite pointedly, “the New Testament itself in no way warrants the assumption that God’s revelation in Jesus Christ consists primarily in communicating supernatural knowledge” [*On Theology* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), 31].



In your own faith how do you know what is “true” – especially about God’s embrace of LGBT people? How do you deal with differences and opposition from others about the “truth?”

Christianity, much like the American Revolution, started with an event. In both cases, the implications and consequences of those events continue to be worked out by fallible human beings seeking to be faithful to what they mean for our existence as human beings and for society.

An unwavering commitment to the ministry of reconciliation is what Paul considers to be the mark of genuine Christian ministry. Although it may be difficult to remain faithful in afflictions and hardships — “as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed” (verse 9) — the virtues of Christian ministry are revealed by the commitment demonstrated in such adversity. Paul argues that when it comes to evaluating the validity of a ministry, it is these commitments, not the outward and lauded appearances of success, that are worthy of commendation.



Out of your own prayerful reflection, what are the true signs of valid ministry?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power.
Grant us the ability to be open and vulnerable to one another, accepting each other in love. Reveal to us the limits of our own capacity to know what we deem to be the truth.
Pour your Spirit into us and enable us to see that your work is not simply about popularity, fame, or fortune.
Provide us the insight to know that your ministry is advanced in various ways, often in hard and difficult places. Amen.

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13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 8), Year B

Overcoming the Margins, Expressing Solidarity

Our actions demonstrate who we are. Whether it is acting audaciously or in solidarity, our actions illustrate who we are.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27 and Psalm 130 \(used in this week's conversation\) or Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15, 2:23-24 and Psalm 30 or Lamentations 3:23-33; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Audacious action can lead to equally extraordinary results!" Michael Joseph Brown



"Our solidarity is expressed in our actions, especially those that require our sacrifice." Shonda Jones



"Holistic salvation requires holistic action." Shively Jackson

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Mark 5:21-43 relates two stories as if they occurred simultaneously, a technique biblical scholars call intercalation. The author intends for readers to interpret one story in light of the other. After instigating a “Gentile mission,” Jesus is challenged by the presence of a crowd. In an interesting twist, Jairus, “a ruler of the synagogue,” seeks the assistance of Jesus. This strongly suggests that not all of the Jewish leadership oppose Jesus. Still, while on his way to Jairus’ house, an unnamed woman — someone quite different than the established religious leader — arrives on the scene secretly seeking Jesus’ assistance as well.



In this narrative two stories are intertwined. In what ways are the narratives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people intertwined with others in distress?

Given the social dynamics of the day, she is a “bodacious,” audacious woman. The biblical scholar Mary Ann Tolbert describes the scene in this way: “That a woman, who at least at one time had some wealth (5:26), should be seen in such a public place evidently unaccompanied by protectors and that she should dare to touch a strange man without his consent are extraordinary events in an ancient cultural context” [“Mark,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 355.]. Nevertheless, since her condition cut her off from the religious community and greatly diminished her financial stability (cf. Lev 15:25-30), this woman may have felt she had no other choice than to act boldly.

Audacious actions have a long history among marginalized populations. Phyllis Wheatley’s published poems were scrutinized by Thomas Jefferson, Voltaire, and other white male intellectuals of the time. With the advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis, the group ACT UP challenged the complacency of American society about the disease. Sojourner Truth, the famous abolitionist, once proclaimed, “Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, ‘cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the Truth to the people” [quoted in *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women*, Marcia Riggs & Barbara Holmes, eds., (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 21]. What this story highlights is the need for individuals, particularly those on the fringes of the accepted social order, to act boldly on their own behalves. As Martin Luther King, Jr. also pointed out, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” (“Letter from the Birmingham City Jail,” in *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King*, James Washington, ed. (New York: HarperOne, 1990), 292]. For a marginalized group of individuals, the only option many times is to come out of the shadows — out of the closet — and press for liberation.

Just as the unnamed woman “knew” changes in her body, so Jesus “knew” changes in his body. The drying up of her blood flow — the cessation of her discharge — is due to the “discharge” of Jesus’ power (Greek, *dynamis*). No one else, including Jesus’ disciples, understands or recognizes what has transpired. Not even Jesus is fully aware of the recipient of this *dynamis*.

So he stops in the middle of the crowd in order to find out. Out of her “fear” (5:33) the woman comes forward to reveal the “truth.” Mark reserves the term truth only for Jesus — who “teaches the way of God in accordance with the truth” (12:14) — and for this woman, the first woman to speak in Mark’s gospel. “Daughter,” a familial term meant to highlight one whose blood cut her off from family, “your faith has made you well!”



In what ways do marginalized people, much like the woman, speak truth to those who are willing to listen?

Jesus then continues his journey to Jairus’ house. The delay, to “heal” and “converse” with the unnamed woman, leads to a disturbance from Jairus’ household. While Jesus is speaking “good news” to the daring woman whose “faith” had made her well, bad news arrives: “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” (5:35). Jesus’ reaction to this news remind us of a black gospel tune, “God may not come when you call him, but he’ll be there right on time!” Jesus’ progress is not hindered by this report. He challenges Jairus to hold on to his faith. He tells the beleaguered father, “Do not fear, only believe” (5:36). Jairus’ faith is what led him to Jesus, the healer, in the first place.

While the story ends with *ekstasei* (ecstasy), Jesus makes an important request of food for the now raised girl. Food suggests a holistic mission that cares for all needs — spiritual, physical, psychological, emotional and even political. This twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus was born in the same year when the older woman began her incessant bleeding. Both are now healed in the same year.



Can you point to places in your life where audacious action has led to amazing, even extraordinary, results?

In **2 Corinthians 8:7-15** the apostle raises the issue of generosity: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (verse 9). It is interesting that Paul frequently referred to the Corinthians’ offering with the Greek term *charis* (usually translated “grace” in English). The financial support of Christians on behalf of poorer sisters and brothers is an act of grace analogous to the grace that God has extended to all of us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The apostle depicts giving as an act of ministry. It is not simply an act of charity. This notion of ministry is important, because ministry is an ongoing way of living, not a one-time event. The ministry of giving is an expression of solidarity. Through the ministry of giving, we enter into solidarity with those in need. We acknowledge that those in need are our brothers and sisters and that we join with them in the effort to overcome their need. Something analogous is intoned in David’s lamentation for Jonathan in **2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27**. Although David did not give anything like money to Jonathan, the reading does highlight his solidarity to the son of Saul. “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (verse 26).



If giving is an act of solidarity, then how does your giving express your solidarity to the cause of LGBT liberation?

At the heart of solidarity is the notion of justice. Therefore, the ministry of giving is about justice, not simply charity. Christians in the United States tend to understand giving as charity rather than justice, because Americans are much better at practicing charity than they are at enacting justice. The American response to national and international tragedy illustrates our willingness to sacrifice for the sake of charity, but the almost insurmountable chasm between the “haves” and the “have nots,” the marginalized and the privileged, the accepted and the unacceptable demonstrates the reluctance of Americans to sacrifice for the sake of justice. Thus, how much and to what causes we give is a statement regarding our commitments, our solidarity to those who need our assistance.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Dearest Lord, in our times of need,
grant us the presence of those who are in solidarity with us.
In our moments of marginality,
grant us the ability to act boldly on our own behalves.
In our commitment to human liberation,
grant us a spirit of sacrifice that will enable us to empower
others to seek
and find their own freedom in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 9, Year B

Communities: Can't Live with Them or Without Them!

These Bible passages raise important questions about the positive and destructive dimensions of life in community.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 & Psalm 48 or Ezekiel 2:1-5 & Psalm 123;](#)
[2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"We live and dance at the margins of many communities where we create new centers of authenticity and grace." Joretta Marshall



"God's goodness will be a circle that draws our critics in – if we are faithful to our calling as people of faith, true to ourselves in both faith and affection." Steve Sprinkle



“We celebrate together God’s grace that embraces all people, especially the unlikely, and empowers us to manifest God’s inclusive love.” Warren Carter

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Two connected and ambiguous themes emerged for us in our conversation about today’s Bible passages. The first centers on the profound ways unlikely people are involved in God’s purposes. The second concerns the supportive and rejecting role community plays for such people. What do we do when the community says “no?” Both themes are of great importance for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, as well as any marginalized communities.

In **2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10**, the anointing of David as ruler of all Israel expresses both themes. David is a complex figure. On one hand, he is an admirable figure, the companion of Jonathan, the attractive and brave young shepherd boy-hero who slays the giant Goliath, the subject of Michelangelo’s marvelous statue *David*. He is, though, also very flawed and vulnerable. He blunders in his adultery with Bathsheba, has Uriah killed, and is condemned by the prophet Nathan. Yet God chooses this unlikely character to be God’s representative, the agent of God’s will and presence.

That choice is expressed and affirmed through David’s community. “We are your bone and flesh,” the tribes of Israel declare (verse 1). They recognize God’s choice of David (verse 2) and David makes a covenant with them (verse 3). Yet the community of Israel’s embrace of David comes at the expense of, even the violent exclusion of another, namely the former king Saul who has been killed. Remembering the time when Saul and David were in conflict, the community declares, “For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led Israel out...” (verse 2). Israel’s comment recalls the violent rejection of which communities are capable in the name of God, while it also identifies a subversive and empowering practice that can emerge in communities. It recognizes that community often forms on the margins, where people find morsels of hope and life in contexts of conflict with the sanctioned center.



What are the qualities of life-giving communities that often live on the margins?

In **Psalms 48**, the community celebrates its identity as God’s chosen people in God’s chosen city, contemplating God’s “steadfast love” and guidance (verses 9 and 13). This is a cozy celebration of specialness for an unlikely small nation. Yet their chosenness as a community also comes at

the expense and exclusion of others. This time the “others” are foreign rulers who panic, flee, tremble like women in labor, and are shattered like ships before the greatness of God (verses 4-7). This xenophobia provides a destructive barrier that disqualifies others from the experience of God’s steadfast love.

Communities reject their own, as well as outsiders, as many LGBT people know. Ezekiel – with his mortality and humanness emphasized in being addressed as “mortal one” - is called to stand and hear God’s address (**Ezekiel 2:1-2**). He is commissioned to a daunting task, namely to be a prophet to Israel. Who wants this job? The language emphasizes from the outset that his own community is unlikely to welcome him. The people rebel and transgress; they are impudent and stubborn, likely to refuse to hear. Ezekiel’s experience resembles that of the psalmist who laments, “we have had more than enough of contempt...of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.” (**Psalms 123:3b-4**). What to do when the community is already saying no?



What sustains us in the midst of communities of rejection?

The New Testament apostle Paul faces a similar situation. He fights for his integrity, ministry, and gospel with the Corinthians, a community he founded. Where he ought to find support, he experiences rejection. In response to their demands to know whether he is a legitimate apostle through whom God speaks (**2 Corinthians 12:12; 13:3**), he sarcastically and self-righteously points, it often seems, not to his accomplishments but to the interplay between his brokenness (the mysterious “thorn in the flesh”) and God’s gracious, sustaining power that he encounters precisely in his “weakness” (verses 8-10).

In an amazing act of reframing, what appears as disqualifying brokenness is an opportunity for blessing, “my grace is sufficient for you” (verse 9). This is no easy cliché, but is a hard-won affirmation as the whole letter demonstrates. In the midst of rejection, Paul finds acceptance, even vindication, but certainly sustaining solidarity with all those marginalized by communities to which they thought they belonged. Such an unlikely one is caught up in the life and death struggle of the gospel.

In **Mark 6:1-13**, Jesus faces a similar situation. “In his hometown” (verse 1), among folks who might be expected to be supportive, Jesus too encounters those who “take offense at him” (verse 3). As with Ezekiel and Paul, the community that should offer sanctuary turns against him. Clobbered by those at home, and clobbered by the larger society, he calls his followers to the same vulnerable way of life (verses 8-9) in the midst of rejecting communities (verse 11).

As with Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus, why would anyone set off on such a difficult journey when the community already says “no”? Because there are, simultaneously, communities that say “yes,” communities that empower and sustain. These disciples, companions of Jesus, go as part of a community of twelve followers (verse 7). They go as a community “two by two” (verse 7). And they find some who welcome them (verse 10) and experience healing and wholeness (verse 13),

even in the midst of hostility. Such communities offer morsels of sustaining hope to other travelers.

These readings for today urge us to be vigilant about the types of communities to which we belong, ever aware of their blessings but also much attuned to their destructive impact, and ever mindful of the “unlikely” places, people, and communities in our midst caught up in God’s good purposes.



How might God be calling you to participate in your community – to challenge it, extend it, work within it?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



We know you, Holy One,
as the One who lives and
moves in communities of all kinds.
Whether we find ourselves in the center, on the margins,
or somewhere in between,
may we nurture those qualities in our churches and congregations
that are life-giving, even as we challenge those that are death-dealing.
Be with us as we move with integrity and grace. Amen.

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15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 10, Year B

Dare to Speak

What does faithfulness look like? Faithful to whom? To what? Why does opposition, even violence, often accompany faithfulness and celebration? How do we live in the face of it?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 & Psalm 24 or Amos 7:7-15 & Psalm 85:8-13; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“We wait for ‘the fullness of time’ when God will gather all people to God’s self in love and acceptance. Until then, may we be lavished with grace, quick to love, slow to anger and committed to justice.” Steve Sprinkle



“The God of the rhythm of life invites us into a faithfulness that sometimes comes at great cost. Today’s Bible passages remind us of the grace and persistence that is needed in light of the cost.” Joretta Marshall



“In the ambiguities of faithful living, life-giving visions accompany death-dealing realities – requiring persistent, courageous and wise engagement.”
Warren Carter

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The scene in **2 Samuel 6** depicts vibrant, colorful, noisy, dynamic celebration as David and his followers bring the ark of God into Jerusalem. The ark, containing the tablets of the covenant, connected the past with the present and signified God's powerful presence with the people. Its presence in Jerusalem, David's city, represented God's blessing of David. But not everyone is in a party mood. David's wife, Michal, the daughter of the former ruler Saul (whom David replaced), despises David's exuberant (and immodest – see verse 20) dancing (verse 16). The scene is full of emotion and challenge: worship and complaint, celebration and opposition, faithfulness and despising.

In another passage from the Hebrew Scripture, Amos the prophet knows similar dynamics in his justice-speaking work. He has discerned God's purposes to judge the people's lack of justice (**Amos 6:12-14**) and unfaithful worship (**Amos 7:7-9**), including condemnation of the ruler Jeroboam. To declare these purposes faithfully, to speak truth to power, is a courageous act. To suggest, though, that a community does not live up to its noble self-image brings immediate opposition as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks know only too well. A priest, Amaziah of Bethel, accuses Amos of being unfaithful, even unpatriotic, in “conspiring” against king Jeroboam. And instead of inviting dialogue with the “out-of-step” Amos, Amaziah urges him to go away (Amos 7:12-13). Amos' response is interesting. In the face of such social exclusion, he reasserts his identity as one who lives faithfully for God (Amos 7:14-15).



Asserting faithfulness can exclude or include.
What is involved in including our critics and detractors as we wish to be included? How do we engage others in such a way that God's inclusive love is encountered?

Psalms 85 provides a hopeful juxtaposition to Amos' experience. The psalm begins by acknowledging God's forgiveness of, not wrathful judgment toward, the people. Verse 8's receptivity to God, “Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,” contrasts with Amaziah's rejection, though to be fair, the psalmist, unlike the prophet, is confident that God's words comprise not judgment but peace and wholeness. Thereafter follows a wonderful vision in which (God's) “steadfast love” meets (human) faithfulness,” and (God's) “righteousness” effects (human) “peace” (verse 10).

Ephesians 1:3-14 continues such a vision. God’s workings among people are marked by extravagant love and generosity (verses 4-6), “according to the riches of the grace God lavished upon us” (verses 7-8). They are also marked by an inclusiveness that “gathers up all things” in Christ (verse 10). Such affirmations – which the passage frames as worship (verses 6 and 12)– derive from a small and marginalized community that celebrates its own inclusion in God’s plans without disinheriting or excluding anyone else. “In Christ *we* have also obtained an inheritance” (verse 11). The declarations of inclusion and inheritance that abound in this passage counter corrosive cultural messages of being unworthy, deviant, or wrong. The passage announces a loud “not true” to such verdicts and claims instead an inclusive solidarity that embraces all, both LGBT and straight.

But after the wonderful visions of faithfulness in Psalm 85 and Ephesians 1, the reading from **Mark 6:14-29** brings us back to reality in a hurry. The story of John the Baptist’s execution is similar to Amos’ experience of the negative consequences of speaking truth to power. On the basis of his faithfulness to the kinship laws in Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21, John has rebuked the “family values” of Herod Antipas and his “wife” Herodias. Or should that be Herodias, the wife of Herod’s brother, Philip (Mark 6:17-18)? Herodias bears a grudge against John for his criticism, while Herod fears him (6:19-20). Subsequently, Herod makes a rash promise to Herodias’ daughter to give her whatever she wants, and the outcome is John’s head on a platter (6:22-28).

Again faithfulness is met not with peace as Psalm 85:8-10 imagines, but with opposition and conflict as it is with Amos. The scene celebrates not generous inclusion (so Ephesians 1) but violent exclusion. Here faithfulness and violence, not faithfulness and steadfast love, go hand in hand. This very disturbing scene raises difficult questions for anybody and any community that lives “against-the-cultural-grain.” Should John have said nothing and self-protectively kept his objections to himself? After all, the chances of Herod and Herodias changing their ways just because a locust-eating prophet criticized them were not high. Would silence have been more prudent as well as self-preserving? Or would it have been cowardly and unfaithful, an opportunity to address a significant issue lost? How do we discern which is which?



How do the collisions between the wonderful visions of faithfulness offered by the readings from Psalm 85 and Ephesians 1 and the cruel rejection of Mark 6 function to shape your efforts to live faithfully and justly? When are silence and invisibility prudent and self-protective, and when are they cowardly and unfaithful? How do we discern?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Dear God, grant us grace
that we may find the courage
and the wisdom to celebrate
your love inclusive of all, exclusive of none. Amen.

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16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 11, Year B

Discerning and Living the Liberating Word

There is a Good Shepherd who binds up the wounds of a community in pain. Discernment is needed to identify the good shepherds and bad shepherds, as well as to identify dynamics for liberation in Bible passages which are sometimes used to abuse people.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 23:1-6 & Psalm 23](#) or [2 Samuel 7:1-14a & Psalm 89:20-37](#) (not included in this commentary); [Ephesians 2:11-22](#); [Mark 6:30-34, 53-56](#).

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“As lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians, we need to stop apologizing for being in the Church. As much as we might not like to deal with religious intolerance, when we do not claim our right to be in church we fail to build a place for God to live.” Beth Pease



“The idea of the Bible as a double-edged sword is important – the seed of liberation is imbedded in what can be taken as a justification for oppressive structures — hence, the importance of discerning the biblical text carefully.” Miguel De La Torre



“Consider how hard it is in our culture for someone who is a woman, a lesbian and a person of color to find time to stop, rest and find the community that will provide respite and healing. When the church provides that reality, it will be good news indeed.” Judith Hoch Wray

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Psalm 23 provides a picture of a shepherd unlike the image of the shepherd found in the book of Jeremiah. This psalmist's shepherd, identified with God, has rarely been experienced by LGBT folk in the church. Hearing the affirmation that God, like a shepherd, anoints my head with oil — chooses me — and meets my needs, can be a very powerful word for those who have been abused by other “shepherds.” When ordination is prohibited by the church, what a good word that God anoints us! Even while rejected, we eat at the table prepared by God in the presence of our enemies. The Eucharist, the communion table, is for us! And to say that we will dwell in God's house forever is a challenge and encouragement not to walk away. This house is ours. Let no one tell us otherwise.



Psalm 23 is traditionally used at funerals and memorial services. How might LGBT people hear the psalm in new and radical ways? What comfort and challenge does it bring to LGBT folk?

In **Jeremiah 23:1-6**, the prophet minces no words in the warning to those who are pushing the flock of God away, scattering and destroying many. Among our conversation group, we discussed how the pain of exile (of never being able to belong, no matter what you do) has been known by those LGBT folk who have been excluded from the church and church leadership. This pain is not unlike the pain experienced by those who have immigrated to the United States and who now are no longer fully accepted in their home country nor fully accepted in the US.

Yet following the warning to those shepherds who have scattered God's flock, the prophet Jeremiah preaches a word of restoration to those who have been driven away, to the remnant who will be brought back to the fold (verse 3).

The restoration of a remnant is cause for celebration, but be cautious. Who is the “faithful remnant?” We recognize that “faithful remnant” is language used by some who want to prevent LGBT Christians from being acknowledged in the Church. The text, then, is a double-edged sword: in it we can hear a word of liberation while others are using the same text as a word of condemnation. This calls for discernment and an ear for the liberating word.

We note that the Hebrew word *tsedek* is translated as “righteous” in Jeremiah 23:5-6 by the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, yet is more accurately understood as “justice” (“*justicia*” in Spanish) or “solidarity.”



Who gets to define who is the faithful remnant?
Do you see LGBT people of faith as part of that remnant or outsiders?

In reflecting on **Ephesians 2:11-22**, we recalled that in the first century, some thought that in order for a Gentile to become a Christian, they had to first become a Jew, to be circumcised. Some persons today think that before a lesbian, gay or bisexual person can become a Christian they must first become heterosexual, they must circumcise their sexual orientation. The good news is that no one has to be circumcised; no one has to give up who they are. No one has to adopt a different culture or orientation or gender identity in order to be Christian.



In Christ, because of Christ, we are an integral part of the community of faith, along with those who have positioned themselves as our enemies. How do we approach and challenge those who are against us and are also a part of the Christian community?

In **Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**, Jesus recognized the tragedy of a community that had no good shepherd. For too long, many in the LGBT community have been like sheep without a shepherd. Places of spiritual rest and safety are few and far between for many. In the midst of intense political unrest and economic crises, today's disciples can hear Jesus' urging to come away to a supportive community and rest awhile. Creating those places of respite and claiming the gifts of the spiritual disciplines of retreat and prayer can be restoring acts that empower us for the work of healing.

To suggest that we can turn Jesus into a totem or good-luck charm that we can just touch and all our problems will just go away is a dangerous interpretation of the Scripture that can keep us from engaging the needs for social justice in our midst. At the same time, for those of us who are workaholics, who think that the world will crumble into anarchy if we take a break from the struggle, it is good to know that there is someone we can touch, in whom we can rest and find healing. We need to pay attention to how we are reading this verse.



What kind of reader of this text from Mark are you? Do you read the text to help you avoid the struggle? Do you read the text to find the healing and encouragement to go on with the struggle for justice?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Good shepherd God,
lead us in paths of justice.
In the midst those who would be our enemies,
feed us with hope and courage.
Grant us discerning ears and supportive communities
that together we may build and dwell in your house of love, forever!
May it be so. Amen.

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17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 12, Year B

Yearning for Abundance

God's desire is our deepest desire. We yearn to be filled with God's love and this love inspires our work for justice, reconciliation, and peace. Our God is a God of abundance and there is always enough deep love to go around.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[2 Kings 4:42-44 & Psalm 145:10-18 or 2 Samuel 11:1-15 & Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6: 1-21](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“Without the yearning that resides at our core, we would lose our vitality, our creativity, our search for meaning” Vanessa Owen



“Our inner life with God is infinite. God's abundance is not only actualized externally, but internally as well.” Sara Rosenau



“An affirmation of desires is part of the fullness of God” Yvonne Zimmerman

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

What is a theology of abundance? Three of the Bible readings for this Sunday shed some light on this question. In 2 **Kings 4:42-44**, the story prefigures several accounts in the New Testament of Jesus' miraculously feeding crowds with extraordinarily meager resources. A common theme is of a crowd "eating their fill" and *still* "having some left over"—the theological insight being that God is a God of abundant plenty. Even when there is apparently not enough, the truer reality is that there is *more* than enough.



What gifts do you or your community seem to withhold – fearful that there is not enough?

Psalm 145:1-18 proclaims that God's openness satisfies our desires (verse 6). Here the insight is not the typical "Christian" insight that desire is bad or wrong and that God will transform our desires into something else (ostensibly better or more pure). In this psalm, God *satisfies* human desires. And, in satisfying our desires, God affirms them as legitimate, and even good. Surely this kind of affirmation of desires is part of the fullness of God that Paul prays will fill the Ephesian Christians (Ephesians 3:19).



What are your desires? What would it look like for God to satisfy your desires? As lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith, when might "desire" be seen as a gift of God? When is it problematic?

In **Ephesians 3:14-21**, Paul's ministry began with a mystical vision of the risen Christ and in this passage we encounter a continuation of this deep spirituality whether or not Paul was the author of the letter. First, the writer rearticulates a vision of a new humanity made possible in Christ. Christ proclaims peace: "Peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:16-17). The prayer which follows is a testimony to the power of Christ's love not only to reconcile communities and cultures, but to reconcile the conflict even in our inner life. The prayer assures us that "Christ dwells in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love" (verse 17).

Connecting with the other readings from today, we understand that our yearning and desire begin and end in our inner most being. God's abundance is not only actualized externally, but internally as well. Our inner life with God is infinite, and our desire and yearnings are "filled with all the fullness of God" (verse 19).

This Sunday's gospel lesson, **John 6: 1-21**, is a story about spiritual hunger. The great church father, Augustine spoke this often quoted prayer, "Thou hast created us for thyself, O God, so that our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee." It is this restless hunger that propelled thousands of people into the desert in search of a man named Jesus known to offer healing to those in need. It is this restless hunger that perpetuates the powerful forces within contemporary culture that work to seduce our human longing towards things that provide empty satisfaction. Consumerism is one of the ways that we manifest our spiritual hunger. It is the restlessness of our hearts that convinces us to "Supersize It" at McDonald's and to buy homes that are 3500 square feet. It is this restless longing that calls us to search social, romantic or sexual websites in an attempt to feel loved and connected. Our restless longing often comes in the form of addictions and it gets expressed in the misled belief that we need to be funnier, more attractive, smarter, wealthier, and more successful.

John's gospel story functions as a reminder to us that the restlessness in the human heart will never be finally stilled by any object or project or person or place. The longing is eternal. It is God-given. It is the place where humanity and God are most intimately connected. And it is actually, good. Without the yearning that resides at our core, we would lose our vitality; our creativity; our search for meaning. Our search for the holy would ebb away and all of our greatest potential and divine possibility would eventually evaporate. Our longing is but an eternal echo of the Divine Longing, which has created us and will sustain us; just as the thousands of people in the Gospel story were sustained and fed by a compassionate Jesus. Our task is to trust that God can and does satiate our hunger with spiritual food that will nourish us into wholeness.



Are there things you do that are attempts to satiate a spiritual longing that only God can fulfill? In what ways have you experienced God's response to spiritual hunger?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Holy One,
Come to us.
Fill us with your fullness.
Remind us that our desires are good
and that love and abundance are present in our lives.
Gently reveal to us the deep desire of the world.
What is our part in fulfilling such hunger, such longing?
Show us your five thousand,
that we may feed them.
We hunger to do justice.
We hunger for mercy.
We hunger to walk humbly.
Root us and ground us in your love

Sustain us in the work
Amen.

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18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 13), Year B

Giving Life to the World

All relationships are life-giving for everyone when they are grounded in mutual love, honesty, repentance and forgiveness.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a & Psalm 51:1-12 or Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 & Psalm 78:23-29; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“God’s love and forgiveness in the presence of Christ in the sacramental bread (manna and Eucharist or Communion) is available to all who come hungry and thirsty.” Helene Tallon Russell



“God sustains us as we venture into unknown regions.” Charles W. Allen



“The question is will we live into God's image or will we try to force God into our image?” Marti J. Steussy

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

This week's Bible readings offer glimpses of relationships as they are meant to be, but sometimes those glimpses run counter to the agendas of some of the biblical writers. Helene and Charles are struck by the classic story of prophetic speaking truth to power in **2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a**. By telling a story of a rich man stealing and killing a poor man's "pet" lamb, Nathan reminds David that power and privilege do not entitle him to violate other relationships that are more vulnerable.

The story, however, speaks not only against some of David's actions, but also against some of God's actions, at least as God is portrayed here. As Marti points out, God is not miffed because David took a woman from another man. God is only miffed because David did it independently of God. After all, God routinely takes men's wives (who are never consulted) and gives them to other men (12:8, 11-12)! Furthermore, God spares David's life only by transferring the punishment to his newborn baby. If we and David are angered at the portrayal of a rich man violating a poor man's relationship, should we be any less angry at this portrayal of God? Speaking truth to power means denouncing images of God as a willful tyrant, even when those images appear in the Bible.

The theme of David's penitence is picked up by **Psalms 51**. Helene, Marti and Charles all wonder if we ever sin against God *alone* (verse 4). Does not sin distort all our relationships, not just those with God? Verse 5 is one of those often cited to support the idea of "original sin." That term may not be helpful. It is more helpful to acknowledge that we are born from and into a world of broken relationships, and we should not pretend otherwise. Among those broken relationships are homophobic and patriarchal ones.



When you see relationships violated, do you get angry? Do you ever find yourself to be the guilty party? When have you experienced the need to confess, or hear another's confession and seek reconciliation?

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 is clearly connected to the reading from the gospel of John. After venturing out into the unknown, the Israelites have second thoughts and complain. But God provides for them by sending quails and, more importantly, manna. Charles notes that in Hebrew *man hu* (verse 15) can be translated in two ways: "What is it?" and, "It is manna"—a self-answering question and a self-questioning answer. God provides "what-is-it?"

Helene cautions that there is a danger here for Christian readers, who may be tempted to identify more with Moses and put down the people of Israel. The lesson itself seems to invite that putdown. But we should remember that there is nothing unbiblical or unfaithful about honest complaints before God. We only need to read the psalms! When the people of Israel express their doubts and fears, says, Helene, God remains faithful to the covenanted relationship, sustaining

them in the wilderness in ways they cannot fathom.



Do you ever have second thoughts about the unconventional paths you have chosen? Do you express them honestly? What gets you through it? What sustains you?

Ephesians 4:1-16 calls us to “grow up” (verse 15) as members of the one Body of Christ. Helene observes that this is a call, not just to unity, but to diversity according to our different gifts (verses 11-12). Charles notes that, although we are called to bear with one another in love (verse 2), we are also called to speak the truth in love (verse 15). People are not necessarily being divisive when they speak in passionate dissent, and unity cannot be invoked to stifle honesty. Marti suggests the following questions for discernment that all of us need to ask:



What winds, trickery and scheming blow about and capture *us*? How do we cultivate the thoughtfulness that will let us see through ideological manipulation? How do we find the courage to speak the truth *in love* (harder than speaking in anger), and how do we cultivate a listening attitude that will let us hear such truth when it’s being spoken *to us*?

John 6:24-35 (and the rest of the chapter) sounds like sacramental language of the Eucharist or Holy Communion, although John’s version of the last supper never mentions broken bread or a shared cup. In the prologue to this gospel (John 1:1-18), John presented Jesus as the all-creative Word made flesh, the embodiment of the true light which enlightens everyone. Now Jesus embodies “that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (verse 33), that is, “the true bread from heaven” (verse 32).

Charles, Helene and Marti agree that this somewhat sacramental equation can point in more than one direction. On the one hand, Jesus, as John portrays him here, seems to imply that the original manna in the time of Moses only foreshadowed the real stuff that Jesus now offers. But, Charles asks, was not the original manna also an embodiment of the same, life-giving activity of God? It is one thing to say that Jesus is truly one with that life-giving activity, but quite another to say that nothing else could share in that intimate union. Marti and Helene agree: what gives life to the world cannot be confined to Jesus. Sacraments are not containers. Neither are sacramental relationships, whether conventional or unconventional. All are life-giving, none are the only givers of life.



How do our relationships bring us to life? How can we share their life-giving power with those around us? What makes a relationship a sacrament?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Nourish us, O God, with the bread that gives life to the world.
Bring wholeness to our broken relationships,
that they may become sacraments of your boundless generosity.
And give us the courage to speak truth to power. Amen.*

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19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 14), Year B

Facing Life's Extremes

In the extremes of grief, despair and anger, we find strength to keep going.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 & Psalm 130 or 1 Kings 19:4-8 & Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“These Bible passages highlight spiritual nourishment which – whether Eucharist or Communion, truth, pot luck church meals, tenderheartedness, or simply bread eaten with the awareness of the divine presence – strengthen us by centering us in what is holy and truly significant.” Helene Tallon Russell



“By living in love we find the strength we need for our journeys through grief, despair and anger.” Charles W. Allen



“The church sometimes states its promises of deliverance a little more absolutely than is helpful. If you’ve been praying and the prayers haven’t been answered, it doesn’t mean you’re one of the sinners.” Marti J. Steussy

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

All of today's Bible lessons bring to mind people in extreme situations: David's grief, Elijah's despair, the faith community's bitterness, wrath and malice, Jesus' connection of boundless life with his looming death. And all of the lessons speak of the God who gets us through these situations. A common temptation is to focus on the getting-through without honestly confronting the full impact of the extremities.



What are some of the extreme situations that have shaped your life? How did you find strength to make it through them? How was God present to you then? Was God present to you?

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33, when heard out of context, signals a moving – and violent – story of a father's grief over his rebellious son's death. Marti points out, however, that according to the narrator, Absalom's rebellion, the resulting nationwide battle, and his defeat and death were all part of God's way of continuing to punish David for his "zipper problem" – his sexual escapades. Those who died, says Helene, were what Star Trek fans call "Ensign Expendables," characters introduced and killed off to have effects on the protagonist. This is what results, says Marti, when people assume, with the narrator, that every event is a direct blessing or punishment from God.

Charles hears in David's lament a protest against the narrator's theology. David cannot accept the outcome as God's will and lets grief overwhelm him. On the other hand, his inability to appreciate the sacrifices countless others made to keep him alive remains problematic. **Psalm 130** fits well with David's grief. Marti points out that the psalmist, unlike the narrator of 2 Samuel, views God primarily as the one who loves and redeems, not the enforcer of punishment.



How do you see God at work in the events of your life? Is every event a direct reward or punishment? What moves you to protest when others try to explain God's will for you? What are your images of God? Do they include God as a rewarder/punisher or that of a lover/redeemer?

In the eyes of this story's narrator, Elijah's despair (**1 Kings 19:4-8**) follows on the heels of a stunning victory. Yet, it may be a troublesome victory in the eyes of many readers today. God had just vindicated Elijah through a spectacular miracle, and Elijah had just seen to the execution of around 850 of his opponents, only to find that the king's wife wants to execute him in

retaliation (1 Kings 18:20-19:3). Now he is on the run and so disheartened as to ask for death.

Instead of facing death, an angel wakes Elijah from sleep and provides enough nourishment for a forty-day trip to Horeb (Mt. Sinai), where he will eventually encounter God as “a sound of sheer silence” (verse 12). Despite the violent background, Helene, Marti and Charles agree that the theme here is almost too obvious: finding the resources to continue at just the point when we think we can go no further. The link to the gospel reading from John is equally obvious. **Psalm 34:1-8** picks up the theme of deliverance from trouble, although, as Marti remarks, it has been “niceified” by omitting verse 9-22, which promise death to the wicked.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 offers an early vision of the Christian community. It dreams of a community in which people are safe to be honest about who and where they are and it calls the readers to be that community. Charles and Helene both appreciate that the writer does not try to deny the legitimacy of anger (verse 26). Marti agrees up to a point, but offers an important caution: “The advice here is great so long as we understand what a complex process putting away bitterness and wrath is. It’s not as easy as just knowing you should. When real harm has been done and there is real cause for anger, it may take longer than a day to get over it!” The passage raises the question: can today’s church be a safe space for people who experience the extremes of grief, despair and anger? Are we too quick to deny whatever looks discomforting? The image of the community in this lesson may be too idealized, but it is an inviting one for those of us who live and love —unconventionally — as Christ forgives and loves us.



How do you find a balance between your need to admit anger and your need to move on? Are there friends or communities that let you be yourself while encouraging you to live in love?

Jesus continues his lengthy discourse about himself as the bread of life in **John 6:35, 41-51**. What he claims strikes his audience as implausible on the face of it (how can somebody we know be from heaven?), but he goes beyond the implausible to the revolting by saying “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (verse 51).

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians should note that eating human flesh is an abhorrent punishment (and probably an abomination) according to Leviticus 26:29. What does that mean for Christians who claim to eat Jesus’ flesh every week? Aside from these obvious connotations of cannibalism, Jesus is making a direct connection between the boundless life he offers and the death he must face to offer it. As with much of John’s gospel, a message of welcome and inclusion (“Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,” verse 35) seems to vie with a message of superiority and exclusion (“Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and they died,” verse 49). But Charles notes that verses 44-45 seems to undercut any claims that Jesus is the “only way” (a misreading of John 14:6). Here there is access to “the Father” which is not through Jesus, but the other way around — no one can come to Jesus except through “the Father.” The unflattering comparison between Jesus, the true bread, and the Israelites’ manna is in fact no comparison at all. People who “eat Jesus” also die in precisely the way the earlier Israelites did. Jesus himself dies! We still hunger and thirst too,

Helene, points out that it is not clear we should want something that fully satisfies us, as we are always works in progress. Again, it is tempting to read Jesus' welcoming words as a promise to rescue us from living fully in the present, but the allusion to his death reminds us that all of these images are complex, carrying several meanings at once.



How do you hear the promise, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry"? Are you included in that promise? How do our hungers tell us what we need?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Bread of life,
come to us in our moments of deepest need,
and sustain us in our own wildernesses of rejection and misunderstanding
that we may never die to your call to live in love as you love us. Amen.*

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20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 16), Year B

Nourished by Wisdom

Wisdom, God's wisdom, isn't conventional wisdom at all. You'll be surprised.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14 & Psalm 111 or Proverbs 9:1-6 & Psalm 34:9-14; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Wisdom comes to us in many forms, some familiar, others seemingly ludicrous." Charles W. Allen



"How we really live wise and fulfilled lives is an ages-long question." Marti J. Steussy



"Wisdom, divine insight, God's love and grace, are given in sharing a meal, a divine banquet, not by having to earn it or study it or buy it." Helene Tallon Russell

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The Bible lessons for this week focus on wisdom. But they may not all agree on what counts as wisdom. Is it the conventional wisdom of *Poor Richard's Almanac* or the apparent foolishness of a God who endures hatred and rejection?

The narrator of **1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14** seems to have an implicit understanding of wisdom that is not fully supported by this particular episode, says Charles. For the narrator, a wise king would worship only in Jerusalem, never in “the high places” (verse 3). And yet, when God appears to Solomon to grant him wisdom, Solomon has been worshipping in “the principle high place” (verse 4)! The narrator has a problem with this, but God apparently does not. God’s wisdom portrayed here does not match the narrator’s. Those of us who live and love unconventionally will inevitably take heart from such a contrast. Many people today consider same-sex marriages improper, but that does not mean that God will not show up to bless them.

Admittedly, as Marti and Helene point out, this episode in 1 Kings was presumably written earlier by Solomon’s court historians with their own self-serving agendas. The net effect, however, is that in its current setting we have an episode depicting God’s wisdom that contradicts the narrator’s judgment. **Psalms 111** connects with this lesson in verse 10: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”



What sort of wisdom governs your life? If your life does not conform to conventional wisdom, are you aware of a deeper wisdom that gives life deeper meaning? If so, have you shared this wisdom with others? Why not do that?

Marti grants that the book of Proverbs often suggests that piety, wisdom and wealth go together. While Charles, like Marti, is skeptical about this, he does recognize that this is often a helpful approach in addiction recovery programs. People in recovery often do experience a better life as a result of wise choices and a deepened spirituality. This is true enough, though it may sound like conventional wisdom. Charles also hears the voice of conventional wisdom in Proverbs 9:6: “Lay aside immaturity, and live.” But Helene disagrees. It is not conventional “for the powerful of the world to teach by hosting a banquet.”

Marti, Charles and Helene all agree that the depiction of Wisdom as a woman in **Proverbs 9:1-6**, though common in the Bible’s wisdom literature, is a shock to today’s conventional wisdom. Charles agrees that, even at its most conventional, there is definitely some gender-bending, subversive potential here. Marti adds that “this lady is also being pretty suggestive in her invitations!” Just as appealing is the suggestion that God (as Lady Wisdom) “really wants to

reach out to the fools, the senseless and the immature, which all of us are some of the time!” **Psalm 34:9-14**, like Psalm 111, implies that the “fear of the Lord” is essential to wisdom.



Does following familiar, wise advice sometimes bring you to a better place? When has that worked, and when hasn’t it? What does it mean for you to “lay aside immaturity, and live”? Does it match what others mean?

The connection between **Ephesians 5:15-20** and the preceding lessons couldn’t be more obvious: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise” (verse 15). In spite of the advice against drunkenness, the alternative, being filled with the Spirit, does not sound like today’s conventional advice. Paul probably is not the author of Ephesians, but if the person writing in his name is Pauline enough, Charles proposes, then the wisdom mentioned here is not everyday wisdom but “the foolishness of God” (1 Corinthians 1: 25) embodied in Jesus’ life, death and risen life.

Marti notes that living in evil days (verse 16) refers to people who are marginalized for not living like the majority in their culture — for choosing a wisdom different from “the world’s” (the straight world’s?). Helene is captivated by the hint that we live and grow according to this Wisdom by welcoming the Spirit of joy into our hearts like a melody. “Melodies get into your heart and you can’t get them out.”



How might singing make you wise? What songs speak to you? What kind of music does God’s foolish-looking wisdom suggest?

For the third week in a row, we are presented with Jesus as the living bread that came down from heaven, this time in **John 6:51-58**. John still presents Jesus as implying that the living bread offered through him is far superior to the original manna of “the Jews.” As in previous weeks, Marti, Charles and Helene find John’s efforts here unsuccessful and contrary to the deeper meaning of the life God shares with us in Jesus *and* in Torah (Jewish law and tradition).

Recalling the theme of wisdom this week, Charles asks, “What could sound more foolish than ‘unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (verse 53)?” Anybody in their right mind would wonder what John could possibly mean. One can imagine, says Marti, why rumors of Christian cannibalism spread around the Empire. What John is alluding to, says Charles, is the God of Christians and Jews who defeats evil not through dominating it but through enduring and outlasting it – all of which is embodied in a new way in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Christians who try to make a triumphalistic message out of this are turning subversive wisdom into the tritest sort of competition. Helene notes how Jesus’ words here connect well with Lady Wisdom’s banquet in Proverbs.



How can we defeat the evils of homophobia and other bigotry? How do we tell the difference between passive acceptance and nonviolent subversion? Where might God be calling you to engage in nonviolent subversion on behalf of God's justice and love?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Gracious Wisdom,
you have set your table and called us to your banquet.
You allure us with your invitation.
Teach us to recognize and love all your ways, both familiar and subversive,
and place your unending melody in our hearts. Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 16), Year B **Beyond Everything Familiar**

God meets us in worship, in our decisions, in our struggles, even in what may offend us, and draws us into unfamiliar territory.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43 & Psalm 84 or Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 or Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"God doesn't have to hate somebody else in order to love me." Marti J. Steussy



"As we read about God's grace as continually expanding in inclusivity – drawing in foreigners, swallows, and those who find the teachings difficult – God is bidding us to include all those considered 'others' by our society and culture."
Helene Tallon Russell



"Everyday activities can manifest something more than the everyday — a God who takes us beyond everything familiar." Charles W. Allen

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Solomon's prayer in **1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43** shows him struggling between his desires to provide a suitable setting where God may be encountered and his recognition that God cannot be confined by any setting, not even the most lavishly constructed temple. Helene, Marti and Charles concur that here we also see the beginnings of the idea that God is more than Israel's God in verses 41-43. Foreigners can also pray "toward" the temple and expect to be effectively heard. These are not converts (there is no "Judaism" as such to convert to yet), and there is no mention of foreigners keeping the Law, or of their being theologically correct. The expectation is simply to recognize that the God who is invoked is great and mighty.

In other words, says Charles, God is specifically involved in the worship of the temple and in the people of Israel. Yet a God who cannot be contained is also involved elsewhere and in other peoples, in ways we do not have to specify. Helene sees a clear parallel between the inclusion of "foreigners" here and the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people today, who may not interpret the Bible in the same way as the majority of churchgoers. Marti invites us to compare this passage with the treatment of foreigners and eunuchs in texts like Deuteronomy 23:1-3 and Isaiah 56:1-7. She asks, "Is God most honored by allowing only the most honorable to draw near, or by God's ability to receive those whom the world does not receive?"

Psalm 84 takes the theme of inclusive even further — God's temple provides a dwelling place for nonhumans too. Helene reminds us, furthermore, that some birds are ambi-sexual, though this probably did not occur to the psalmist.



How and where do you worship God? Does your worship convey that God is present? Does it convey that God is free to be present anywhere? How welcome are strangers?

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 can easily be read, and *has* been read, as encouraging the rankest form of intolerance — "only our way is the right way, so you'd better choose our way or be driven out."

But, asks Charles, is this just an insistence that everyone embrace our view of God, or is it a call to everyone, we included, to serve a God who is not confined even by our best traditions? With the benefit of hindsight, this lesson can be read as calling us to keep expanding our views of God. The direction of that expansion, Helene adds, is one of liberation, not of the conquest that Joshua envisions. In that light, the God of **Psalm 34:15-22** is not so much the judge between the righteous and unrighteous as the one who "is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (verse 18).



How do we tell the difference between God and our own views of God? How do we remain open? Can we make space, without undercutting where we need to stand, for others who believe they must stand somewhere else?

People who are tired of hearing God invoked to justify military ventures are likely to be put off by the militaristic imagery of **Ephesians 6:10-20**. The language of “spiritual warfare” can also easily slide into obsessions with paranormal entities. But Helene suggests that this imagery can be seen as a move to subvert our inherent tendencies toward warfare and violence.

Charles is reminded of an exchange in the movie *Jeffrey*. Jeffrey, a gay man, is accosted by gay bashers who threaten to kill him. He says, “You have weapons? So do I . . . irony, adjectives, eyebrows.” The weapons in Ephesians are truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit. Like Jeffrey, those of us who are marginalized must often rely on such intangibles to respond to attacks. We do, furthermore, contend not just with “blood and flesh” but with principalities and powers in the forms of homophobia, heterosexism and patriarchy. [See Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).] Marti is concerned that such combat imagery, even when “spiritualized” can still encourage us to see the goal as one of destroying what threatens us. The goal however is not destruction but transformation and reconciliation.



How do you view the powers that attempt to marginalize you? How do you engage them? What list of “weapons” would you make? What goal do you envision?

John 6:56-69 is the final portion in Jesus’ lengthy discourse about the living bread from heaven. His language is bound to offend all his listeners: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (verse 56). Such a practice, in literal terms, would be an abomination, yet Jesus speaks as though what is taken by some to be an abomination may turn out to be life-giving.

Even Jesus’ disciples find these words difficult, and many turn away. Charles suggests a parallel. Today many respond to an LGBT-friendly gospel with “this teaching is difficult,” and many turn back. Unpopularity does not prove that our rendition of the gospel is right, but it can’t be cited against us either. Helene finds welcome in the fact that some disciples did have difficulty with Jesus’ teaching. True, some left because of that, but Jesus did not drive them away. We do not all have to agree to be in community.



When others have difficulty with what you consider good news, how do you respond? Should you change what you say? Are those who

have difficulty still friends? How do you decide?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



God beyond our reckoning,
make your dwelling-place with us,
and move us beyond our own limited glimpses of your presence.
Dwell with us also in our struggles against all that oppresses us,
that we may not demonize others
but call them, with us, to grow beyond where we are. Amen.

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22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 17), Year B

Listening, Loving, Doing

Today's Bible readings call for listening and thinking with our hearts, cultivating purity of heart and rejecting traditions which fall short of God's justice and mercy.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Song of Solomon 2:8-13 & Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9 or Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9 & Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"From listening comes doing – comes action! When we know ourselves and those around us, we are able to act with true purity of heart." Larissa Kwong Abazia



"The admonition to be 'slow to anger' is not a pronouncement against feelings, but a challenge to remember that anger is only a messenger of legitimate need – not a producer of righteousness." Jacki Belile



“We need to listen with our hearts along with our minds. When I think with my heart, I can avoid being trapped in Tradition – refusing to ask questions or following along because I don’t know any other way.” Sarah Carpenter-Vascik

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Our conversation about this week’s lectionary Bible passages began with **James 1:17-27**. What is the way of God’s wisdom? The book of James suggests that it is the “law of liberty” (James 2:12). And that law starts with doing. Doers of the law’s basic justice requirements place themselves in risky outreach settings in which we are inevitably challenged to know who we really are. Acts of justice hold up the mirror that enables our transformation of heart, while doctrinal obsessions and arguments merely keep us in bondage.

Deeds and words both matter in the book of James. And at the beginning of today’s reading, we are called to be quick to listen, not to speak (James 1:19). This is a kind of listening that calls for inward listening. Sarah, a transgender woman, reminds us: “Before my transition, I needed to step back and away from all the outside advice I was getting from people. I needed to really listen for God’s voice inside, in the midst of all the other voices.” Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people know that it is often a matter of life and death that we distinguish the voices and learn to trust inner listening. The author of James provokes us, however, to remember that such times of contemplation cannot be divorced from habits of service and justice.

Listening to others without a prayerful discerning heart can lead to powerlessness. Words can be hurtful, dangerous and affect others in ways that the speaker may not realize. Those in power in our denomination, local church or civic settings may have power to name the “tradition” or to label others: for example, when only men decide about women’s ordination or only heterosexuals decide about the ordination of LGBT people in the church. Fatigued by the struggle against endless pronouncements, LGBT people may come to this place: “I just don’t know if I can listen anymore.” We cannot ignore the reality of power by idealizing an uncritical, non-discerning listening posture. We can, instead, lift up a reminder that those in power may themselves be transformed when they have the courage to listen to LGBT people for God’s voice.



What do you do to listen for God’s voice in the midst of so many voices saying so many things? Where is God’s voice in those that judge you defiled or stained? Is it there at all? What spiritual practices are important to you as you listen for God’s voice?

Concerns for avoiding being stained or defiled -- and the efficacy of human laws for purity -- are clear, too, in **Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**. There, the attachments to habits of ritual purification by some first-century religious leaders are challenged by Jesus. Then, as now, codes and rules can be used as weapons of “gatekeepers” to avoid encounters with the others or to decide “who’s in, who’s out.” Jesus calls upon the prophetic tradition of Isaiah to challenge “human precepts” which stand as replacements of God’s true law, a law intended to create a purity of heart that seeks encounter, not escape from the “other” (Mark 7:6-7 and Isaiah 29:13).

These hard words about purity codes are not only for those who push others outside. The words challenge the internal purity codes that many LGBT people carry within their own hearts. We know that many people, and LGBT people in particular, carry a profound internalized sense that they are corrupt from the inside out and incapable of producing good fruit, just and compassionate action. Addressing this entrenched lie requires pastoral listening, storytelling in community, and theological reflection on our gifted lives. It also calls us to overcome our self-negativity with compassionate action so we can remember who we truly are. Joined to God in just and loving action, we are ever more deeply formed in God.

Such just and compassionate action will call us to act and challenge destructive and death-dealing systems and laws wherever we encounter them – inside the church or outside. We resist sexist, racist, heterosexist and gender-dualist precepts through family and civic mores as well. The church must challenge them all. It is our call to evaluate and challenge traditions in the light of unfolding understanding of creation, justice and God’s gospel of grace.



Where have you heard judgments about you that declare you to be defiled? What was said? How did you respond? When might you make such judgments?

We long for a life-giving law, guidelines that generate liberty, justice and purity of heart. Where do we turn for admonitions and standards which ground us *and* invite encounter, growth, and liberating listening for God’s new Word?

In the book of **Deuteronomy 4**, we read about God’s call to God’s people to “give heed to statutes and ordinances” (verse 1). We wonder: Why the call has often been used as dangerous seeds of religious supremacy, unquestioned obedience to rules, and closed thinking? At the same time, we know faithfulness and obedience reflect the covenant of love we share with God. The lectionary invites us to turn to the psalms and Song of Solomon, other words from the Hebrew Scripture, to add to and form our understanding of faithfulness.

In **Psalms 15**, the psalmist envisions measurements of “blameless” (verse 2) which echo in the witness of Jesus and the author of James. True religion, true spiritual security, lies in a lifestyle of honesty, care for our neighbors’ needs and reputations, and sacrificial integrity. “Those who do these things shall never be moved” (verse 5).

LGBT people who seek a holy life know well what it is to receive slander. We know what it is to experience evil at the hand of well-intentioned friends. We know the cost of public reproach: organized efforts to prevent equal access to marital benefits, employment and housing opportunities and the stripping away of the Church's blessing. We are challenged by Psalm 15 to imagine that our abiding peace comes not merely from successful battles for social advancement, but from faithful lifestyles of justice-making. This is not because such acts are necessary to earn God's favor, but because lifestyles of justice and service place us in perpetual encounter of others and ourselves.



What does it mean to despise the works of the evil – including those aimed at us -- without diminishing sacred worth of those who sin against us?

Inclusion of the Song of Solomon in the lectionary ought to provoke us to appreciate this rare ancient witness, which is so clearly an unapologetic blessing of sexual love. There is joy in **Song of Solomon 2:8-13**, (a text labeled “springtime rhapsody”). There is leaping, bounding, looking and singing. When we reflected on the passage, we imagined lovers’ relief and release at springtime legislative victories for gay marriage and civil unions across our land. This ancient text about beauty, desire and love (outside of traditional marital norms then or now!) communicates the transcendent longing, hope and joy potentially known in all forms of erotic union when tenderness, appreciation and invitation to communion are present. We dare to imagine that generations of lovers raised in welcoming churches may practice an embodied spirituality, a more faithful vehicle for receiving the whole gifts of God’s wisdom, healing this world and blessing even our opponents. “Arise, my love, and come away” (verse 10). Let’s hear in these words an invitation to encounter this world, rather than seek to escape its stain.



What does God’s love teach us about human love? And what does human love have to teach us about God’s love? How might a fear of the erotic get in the way of deeply appreciating and attending to one another?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



We come, O God, with grace poured on our lips
by the unconditional love you offer us.
In You all equity, righteousness and love are sought
in our hearts and fulfilled in our actions.
Without You, our hearts are hollow;
wickedness is lived out in our interactions and our labors are empty.
Guide us so that we may join as one community
to truly listen to the voices and stories of others.
Help us to avoid the human divisiveness that calls us
to see people as “other” instead of brother, sister or friend.
Only then shall we act in ways of love for all of your people.
Spirit, anoint us to sing songs of love throughout creation. Amen.

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23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time (Proper 18), Year B

HEAR THE CRY AT THE GATE

Hear a prophetic call to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in all of today's readings — from the Hebrew Scripture, the book of James and in the gospel of Mark's encounter between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman. It is a call to use our experience of being on the fringe to make sure others are included.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-10 \(11-13\), 14-17; Mark 7:24-38](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Our experience on the fringes of society gives the LGBT community a way of seeing alienation throughout our society. Like the Syrophoenician woman, we fight for recognition and acceptance. As we find our place, it becomes our task to remain focused on those who remain in the margins from whence we've come." Wayne A. Reed



"Black, single and lesbian mothers are the Syrophoenician woman of today. Faith is interactive. It includes the willingness to challenge Jesus and the church — to break taboos in order to speak out and claim our rightful spiritual heritage." Ann Holmes Redding



"Hear a new proverb, especially for those in the LGBT community: 'Personal integrity is to be chosen rather than a good name, and more to be valued than great riches. The rich and the poor, the gay and the non-gay, have this in common: God is the maker of us all.'" Judith Hoch Wray

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 brings a prophetic word to the whole church about our treatment of the poor. The proverb is a sweeping reminder that God is the God of both the privileged and the poor (Proverbs 22:2), that God insists on an end to economic oppression (Proverbs 22:16) and that God calls us to grateful generosity (Proverbs 22:9). The LGBT community knows what it means to be a stranger and “afflicted at the gate” (Proverbs 22:22). Yet our community is also called to recognize that we haven’t always embraced those who are poor. This text invites a fresh examination of the intersection of oppressions. Remembering that to be LGBT is to be at the gate (outside), we dare not enter the gate and leave others outside. LGBT folk who are privileged enough to be “out” can no longer afford to ignore those who are poor. No matter how much we think we gain by our own financial privilege, unless we address economic injustice, we lose (Proverbs 22:16). Being a supporter of the LGBT community includes solidarity with those who are poor and marginalized.



Who are those afflicted at the gate? And what is their relationship to each other?

James 2:1-17 continues the prophetic call of Proverbs. Beware when other people’s oppressions are seen as less important than ours. James 2:1-7 judges economic favoritism that lifts up those who are privileged and disregards those who are poor. It uncovers superficial faith that is seduced by appearances — an insidious part of our own culture today. James offers a word of both mercy and challenge. When we suffer the judgment of those who think themselves righteous, hear the good news: “Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:13). When we favor wealth and attractiveness to the neglect of our sister and brothers, we sin. “Love your neighbor as yourself” (James 2:8-9).



What symptoms of “showing partiality” do you recognize in your community? Ask various groups to answer the same question and compare the answers.

Mark 7:24-30, a story about who has access to the table, is placed between the story of the “Feeding of the 5,000” (Mark 6:30-44) and the “Feeding of the 4,000” (Mark 8:1-10). The story presents Jesus expressing his faith tradition’s position that a Gentile (not to mention a woman, with a demon-possessed daughter) could not share the table with a Jew. This is the implication of the statement, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27). Jesus is challenged to move beyond what he had been taught, and to include at the table those who had been understood as outside God’s love and care. The question faced by the early church can be paraphrased in the imagery of Proverb 22: The Gentiles are at the gate. Are we going to let them in?



Who is the Syrophoenician woman today?

Mark 7:31-37, the account of Jesus healing the man who could not hear, reminds us how often marginalized people and communities, such as those who are deaf and those who are LGBT, are told to keep good news to themselves (Mark 7:36). An encounter with the freeing work of Jesus the Christ, however, opens ears, releases tongues and invites bold testimony. Such a zealous announcement of the healing is one account in Scripture of when disobedience to Jesus is celebrated (Mark 7:36-37)! The Scripture offers a particular reminder to not diminish the persons and testimonies of our LGBT and non-LGBT sisters and brothers in the deaf community.

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PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of the rich and the poor,
of the gay and the non-gay,
remind us that you are the maker of us all.
Open our ears
that we may hear the cries of those at the gate,
and that we may act to ensure all may enter and feast at your table.
Save us from the pride of believing that
other people's oppressions are less important than our own.
Fill your church with the compassion of Jesus,
that all your people may experience and embody your mercy.
Amen.

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24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 19), Year B

THE HEART OF A TEACHER

From where does a teacher draw strength to teach? The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community is called to be teachers, to sustain the weary with a word, with a gentleness born of wisdom. Both Isaiah and Mark remind us that the consequences of teaching may be suffering. Jesus assures us, however, that the ultimate outcome is resurrection and new life.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 50:4-9a and Psalm 116:1-9; Proverbs 1:20-33 and Psalm 19; James 3:1-13; Mark 8:27-38](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“When we stay grounded in our God-given identity, then whatever shame people try to throw our way will have to bounce off. The Isaiah text promises that because God helps us, we will not be disgraced.” Judith Hoch Wray



“The readings from Isaiah, James and Mark mean so much to the LGBT community. No matter how much wisdom and gentleness we may bring to the church, our role as teachers may still lead to suffering. However, undergirding us is the promise of the resurrection.” Wayne A. Reed



“The learnings that come from being part of a group targeted by oppression often bring information necessary for the health of the whole community. As a straight ally of LGBT persons, I learn that only by receiving with respect the sometimes difficult stories of my sisters and brothers can all share in the new life they offer.” Ann Holmes Redding

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Isaiah 50:4-9a offers the testimony of one who knows herself to be called by God, in this instance called to be a teacher, wakened to listen as those who are taught, challenged to sustain the weary with a word. The text celebrates the power available to those who stand in their God-ordained identity and calling. In spite of verbal and physical abuse (Isaiah 50:6), in the face of attempts to disgrace or shame, that teacher centered in a God-given identity is able to stand against any adversary. She or he knows God's verdict of acceptance and encouragement (Isaiah 50:7-9). The psalmist in Psalm 116:1-9 expresses a similar strength and gratitude. In spite of distress, persecution, affliction, even death, God delivers and is merciful to those whose whole lives are grounded in God (116:5-6). What a valuable word for the LGBT community! When one claims the truth of one's core identity in God — whether that core is known through being a teacher or in claiming the fullness of one's God-given gender identity or sexual orientation — divine support is available. Detractors will not have the last word.



What inner truth is so central to your life that nothing can shake it? In what way do you understand God to be helping you in that calling?

Proverbs 1: 20-33 portrays holy Wisdom as a prophetess-teacher whose teaching, whose knowledge, has been rejected. It calls upon all of us to listen carefully for the wisdom of God, no matter from whom it comes (Proverbs 1:23-25). Proverbs is paired with Psalm 19. This psalm reminds us that the whole universe will be our teacher, if we but listen.



From whom or where do we seek wisdom and knowledge? Who or what are the teachers in whom we experience God? Who have been the teachers who have inspired the LGBT community? How have we experienced God through them?

James 3:1-13 invites us to reflect on the influential role of teachers in the church. This reading reminds us that the words of a teacher touch the soul and, because they reach the vulnerable places of the heart, have potential both to heal and to destroy. While teachers are called to sustain the weary with the word (Isaiah 50:4), their words become spiritually lethal when they are divorced from God's goodness, gentleness and wisdom (James 3:8-13). The destructive effects of poisonous teaching on the LGBT community have a long history in the church; many LGBT believers remain ostracized even still by the condemning words of a spiritual leader they trusted. The fiery language of this text invites us to consider the spiritual consequences of judging those who are made in the likeness of God and calls the church to select teachers who have wisdom and understanding (James 3:1, 13).



How does one challenge teachers who abuse those made in the image of God?

Mark 8:27-38. Why, after being revealed as the Messiah, does Jesus call for silence about himself (Mark 8:29-30)? Is this an occasion of being in the closet? Perhaps he does not want his disciples to be distracted by a premature vision of messianic victory. When Jesus describes suffering as a necessary part of his calling, Peter rejects Jesus' claim (Mark 8:32-33). Jesus then rebukes him. Jesus' teaching here emphasizes that living with integrity often involves suffering, but that suffering ends in the true victory of resurrection. Paradoxically for the LGBT community, it is breaking out of secrecy — not keeping silent — that often brings suffering. The promise of resurrection and new life, however, stands as vindication of living with truth and openness.



How can straight supporters aid LGBT folk who face discrimination or suffering because they live out in faith and with integrity?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Teaching God,
teach us to listen as those who are taught.
Save us from the arrogance that thinks we can judge others.
Make your wisdom our constant companion
and gentleness our guide,
so your Church can offer a faithful witness
to Jesus Christ,
the suffering and resurrected one.
Guard our tongues that we may sustain the weary
with words of your love for all.
Amen.

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25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 20), Year B

THE VULNERABLE WAY

God calls us to a courageous vulnerability that exposes oppressive structures of power and privilege, and opens the way for a new and holy community.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Proverbs 31:10-31 and Psalm 1 or Jeremiah 11:18-20 and Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“Those who are vulnerable or maligned can show us God’s very heart.” Charles Allen



“Scripture constantly subverts our definitions of power and privilege.” Holly Hearon



“The quest for justice anywhere is necessarily linked with the requirement for justice everywhere.” Michael Miller

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In **Mark 9:30-37**, Jesus' disciples are exposed as inadequate in their understanding of who Jesus is, and what it means to be identified with him. They hide their ignorance, even as they indulge their preoccupation with power and status. This sets the stage for important lessons regarding authentic personal existence and wholesome community. Jesus moves the concern from "who is the greatest" (Mark 9:34) to the spiritual significance of "being like a child" (Mark 9:35-37). With "child" understood as representing "the vulnerable," lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT) may more closely identify with those to whom Jesus is pointing. "The vulnerable" are those who operate in terms of the reversal of customary power relations. In verse 37, "vulnerability" is associated with the capacity to be welcoming, to receiving the other. Surely the welcoming person is one who facilitates nurturing an inclusive community. This emphasis is far-reaching as it clearly indicates that whoever welcomes the vulnerable welcomes the one who was sent by God, and ultimately God.



In what ways do lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people continue to be a vulnerable people?

Proverbs 31:10-31 has been used by some to both pigeon-hole and idolize women as capable wives for husbands. In spite of any traditional subordination of women, the abilities and opportunities of the woman in this passage are significant. For example, the wife can buy fields and engage in commerce. Of particular significance for LGBT people is that she is not being judged merely on the basis of her gender or role in connection to a husband. Similarly, LGBT people should not be judged merely on the basis of their sexual identity, but on the quality of their contributions to human welfare.

The readings from the Wisdom of Solomon, Jeremiah and the Psalms, like Mark, emphasize the suffering of the righteous one. Of immediate significance for LGBT people is **Wisdom 2:15**. In the passage, the motive for destroying the righteous one is because "his life is unlike others" and "ways are strange." The accusers don't like him because he is truly righteous and different. Like the threatened one (Wisdom 2:13), LGBT people claim they are "children of God." Significantly, it is the ungodly who reject the righteous one, whereas today most often it is those who consider themselves "godly" who reject the LGBT community.



How do you maintain hope in the face of people who despise you because you are different?
Where do you gain strength when someone attempts to get rid of you to prove your life is

wrong?

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people must not ignore a very painful element in these readings. As Holly Hearon suggests, those who seek the way of vulnerability may not be vindicated in the time and place and way we expect. Michael Miller goes further and suggests that some may not ever be vindicated. Yet often it is the hope of vindication which keeps oppressed people going.

In our readings, this hope is expressed both in terms of a God “who judges righteously,” and God who even honors the request for revenge (**Jeremiah 11:20** and **Psalms 54:5**)! Charles Allen thinks that construed positively, revenge can be seen as a desire for one to know the full consequences of his or her actions. It may be a legitimate quest by the petitioner not to suffer alone: “Our oppressor should suffer with us.” Although vengeance may be seen as God’s action (Deuteronomy 32:35 and Romans 12:19), people of faith are instructed to choose another path: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). In the end, revenge is a perversion of mutuality and community. It seeks harm for the other.

Our reading from **James 3:13-4:3** recommends a life informed by “wisdom from above.” Such wisdom leads to a life that recalls the “vulnerable” whom we focused on in the gospel lesson from Mark. Can there be a more vulnerable person than one who is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality and hypocrisy” (James 3:17-18)? These qualities are not easy to embrace. Still, we must not lose sight of the message that the person informed by wisdom is not one who promotes self, but who simply does what is right. The contrary approach is identified in James 4:2b-3.

Finally, Charles challenges us to consider the closing words in the passage (James 4:1-3). The reasons for our failed petitions to God refer not only to selfish desires, but may also point to the injustice and violence waged upon the LGBT community.



Are there petitions you need to make and issues you need to address so that the communities in which you live will be more inclusive and nurturing of LGBT people?

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PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God, give us your wisdom,
keep us vulnerable,
for the sake of your
just, welcoming
and peaceable community. Amen.

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26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 21), Year B

UNEXPECTED ALLIES

Who brings healing? Who brings justice? Are you ever surprised whom God may be using for God's purposes? Does God enlist those we often disregard to carry out God's reign of compassion and justice?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22 and Psalm 124 or Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 and Psalm 19:7-14; James 5:13-20; and Mark 9:38-50](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"It takes courage to act on behalf of others and to receive the gifts of those who appear to us as the 'other' but whom God claims as God's own." Holly Hearon



"If the complex cosmos reflects anything of God's nature, then we honor God by our willingness to embrace a diversity of persons, especially those beyond our comfort zone." Michael Miller



“God’s Spirit cannot be confined, not even by those whom God has called.”
Charles Allen

WHAT’S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Mark 9:38-50 revolves around the theme of unexpected alliances. Jesus' disciples, seeing someone casting out demons in Jesus' name, wanted to stop him because he was not a part of their group (Mark 9:38). But Jesus rebukes the disciples: “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40). Earlier (Mark 9:33-37), Jesus challenged the disciples' understanding of what it means to be “great,” reminding them, “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” It seems the disciples focused on power and control. They assumed a position of privilege. They wanted to regulate who was in and who was out. This is much the same as when Christian communities attempt to regulate “who is in and who is out” by restricting the access and roles of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in their congregations and denominations. Charles Allen observes that if one takes this passage seriously, blocking ministry of outsiders is a grave offense.



What gifts are churches missing out on by the exclusion of LGBT people from their communities?

Jesus' admonition, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42), can be heard differently. Michael Miller proposes that people who are not creating stumbling blocks, but are contributing to the welfare of the community, are acceptable. They are acceptable whether they describe themselves in relation to the reign of God or not.

Holly Hearon hears this verse as a caution to the disciples not to exclude — that is, place a stumbling block before — those who are casting out demons in Jesus' name. The text reminds us that the “in group” may be far larger than we can imagine. Allies may arise from unexpected places.



Who has proved to be an “unexpected ally” to you or your community in your efforts to work

for the inclusion of LGBT people in church and society?

A similar theme arises in **Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29**. Here, it is Joshua, second-in-command to the great patriarch Moses, who protests that those prophesying in the camp should be stopped (Numbers 11:28). Moses, whose passionate and bitter complaint to God has resulted in this gift of prophesy being given to these elders, responds, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets?” (11:29). Where Joshua sees these prophets as intruders, Moses welcomes them. In both Mark and Numbers, the challenge is not to those who are engaged in “unauthorized” deeds of power or prophesying. Rather, the challenge is to those who think that these persons are not “authorized” to carry out these activities. **Psalm 19:7-14** invites us to examine ourselves for our “hidden faults” (Psalm 19:12); heard alongside Mark and Numbers, this might include the ways in which we evaluate the ministries of others.



What are some ways that LGBT people engage in ministry, even when others do not view them as authorized to do so?

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 continues the theme about someone who is not recognized by those around her and yet performs a mighty deed, or, in her case, an act of courage. The story of Esther reminds LGBT communities and their straight supporters that silence indeed equals death. There is no safety in “passing” as one in the majority community when one is not. Michael Miller, however, observes that Esther’s timing is strategic. It was important for Esther, and us, to test the setting and to exercise wisdom before acting. Psalm 124 encourages us to remember the ways in which God has delivered us in the past.



What acts of courage are you willing to take on behalf of LGBT communities?

Each of the earlier texts touches on the theme of the welfare of the community. **James 5:13-20** continues this theme, naming ministries that serve to build up the entire faith community. Through such ministries as praying, singing, healing, confessing and forgiving, we are invited to believe and discover that change can occur.



Where do you see hopeful signs of change for LGBT communities?

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PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Eternal Wisdom,
grant us the courage to reach across borders
so we form alliances
with all your people of goodwill.
Together, God,
strengthen us to work
for the restoration of the whole of creation. Amen.

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27th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Proper 22), Year B

GOD WORKS AMONG US

God comes to us in our flesh — on our terms — to draw us into right relation with one another and all of creation.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Job 1:1, 2:1-10 and Psalm 26](#) or [Genesis 2:18-24 and Psalm 8](#);
[Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“Our world can be cold, vicious and alienating. It is a blessing when we find persons who both seek and are capable of mutual relationships. This contributes to God’s desire that we experience fullness of life.” Michael Miller



“God is always God-with-us.” Charles Allen



“These texts invite us, ultimately, to see our worth as human beings — loved and valued by God.” Holly Hearon

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Mark 10:2-16 has often been used against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) folk. Some readers claim that Jesus is defining marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman. But here, Jesus is explicitly answering a question about how a husband should treat his wife (Mark 10:2). He emphasizes that when two people become one flesh, God is in that union. Because of that holy union, neither is free to treat the other as disposable property (Mark 10:9-12). Children, as well, are not disposable property because God's reign belongs first to the most vulnerable among us (Mark 9:14-15).



Where in our society do you see evidence of people being treated as disposable property? Where do you see hope that such use and misuse of people is being transformed into healthy relationships?

Furthermore, this is not the last word on relationships. Jesus won't let us use Scripture to continue to use and misuse God's children. Jesus says that the Scripture of his time is a response of God's open heart to the hardened hearts of God's people (Mark 10:5). God's Word comes to us in our flesh and on our limited terms. God works among us through our limited ways. No Scripture passage is the last word. We have to search Scripture for signs of the open community to which God is drawing us. Moses knew that. Jesus knew that, and so did other rabbis. But many of us have forgotten it.



How do our lives and relationships reflect the open community that God desires?

Genesis 2:18-24 (cited by Jesus) is another passage used against LGBT folk. Perhaps you have heard the ridiculous attacking expression, "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." But this passage shows God working with the first human to find a suitable partner. God does not decree who Adam's partner will be. God instead offers Adam innumerable choices and discovers that only a "one flesh" partner (Genesis 2:24) can awaken Adam's delight. When we love those who awaken our delight, we follow Adam's and God's original example. It is not good for us to be alone (Genesis 2:18), so we work with God toward relationships that awaken our delight. For more information on this passage and others from the book of Genesis, discover the insights of [Steven Greenberg](#), rabbi and Hebrew scholar.



Have you — or, when have you — ever felt God at work in your delight with another?

Psalm 8 also speaks of God at work in and through our care for God's works. "Dominion" is a dangerous word (Psalm 8:6) when used to control nature only for a short-sighted or self-possessed desire. But it can remind us that the future of many species is in fact in our hands. Will they join us in moving toward God's open community? Or will we stand in their way? God lets us shape that future, for good or ill.

Hebrews 2:5-12 alludes to Psalm 8 in order to continue making extravagant claims (begun in Hebrews 1:1-4) about Jesus. The author speaks so extravagantly because of a conviction that the end of all history was at hand (Hebrews 1:2). After 2,000 years, Christians should be careful not to use these claims about Jesus as excuses to ignore what God has been doing in other faith communities, especially in Judaism. God comes to us in our flesh, on our terms, "in many and various ways" (Hebrews 1:1). We Christians have found the shape of Jesus' life, death and risen life to be definitive even of the way we think of God (Hebrews 2:8-12). We need not apologize for that, but we should not expect others to apologize for putting things differently — not if we mean what we say about the shape of Jesus' life!



How does the shape of Jesus' life open you to the faiths of others?

Both the writers of **Job 1:1, 2:1-10**; and **Psalm 26** refuse to see evil's apparent triumph as the last word about our lives or God's life. In the face of evil, Job refuses to put himself or God under a curse. The portraits of God in this book are disturbing, and the book offers no explanation for why the innocent suffer. But Job refuses to "blame the victim" (himself!). At the end of the book, God commends his refusal (Job 42:7). The psalmist likewise refuses to see evil as a judgment from God. Placed alongside the other passages for this day, we are invited to see God working and speaking through this refusal to blame the victim. We even see God revealed in the persistent insistence that God had better turn out to be just, and also in the refusal to see oneself, or anyone else, as defective goods.



When was a time when you realized that your affections did not make you defective goods? What made the difference?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Giver of all life,
move among us and through us,
in our loving and our living.
Draw us toward your community of welcome.
Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

28th Sunday of Ordinary Time, (Proper 23), Year B **GOD, HAVE YOU FORSAKEN US?**

God calls us into relationship. When suffering and trouble abound, we call out as well: “God, where are you?”

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Job 23:1-6, 16-17 and Psalm 22:1-15 or Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 and Psalm 90:12-17 \(not included in this conversation\); Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“As the biblical words of God were born out of an oppressed community, today’s LGBT community is pregnant with words of truth out of our liberation struggle.”
Eun-sang Lee



“The readings create an opportunity for LGBT people to name their own experiences of suffering within the broader faith community. At the same time, they call us to connect our own history with the Church’s history.” Laci Lee Adams



“In these passages, we see that our own comfort and luxuries may indeed be obstacles to living into the Reign of God.” Sean McRoberts

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 and **Psalm 22:1-15** portray God as seemingly absent from God's people in their suffering. These two readings, however, can be powerful resources for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT). The psalmist testifies to the pain of emotional, mental and physical suffering (Psalm 22:6-7, 14-15), while Job gives voice to consuming despair (Job 23:16-17). The readings create an outlet for the LGBT community to name their own experiences of suffering within the broader faith community, while also calling on them to connect our history with those people of God, our ancestors, who came before us (Psalm 22:4-5).



What are the cries, the sufferings, in our world that no one, including God, seems to notice?

Both the psalm and Job rage against an absent God. Some commentators believe the central question of Job is: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Yet when the readings from Job and the psalm are put into conversation, a new question emerges: "Where is God when bad things happen to good people?"

The foundation of these readings is relational! Both the psalmist and Job are searching for God (Job 23:3, 8-9; Psalm 22:1-2). The Scripture writers continue to call God back into relationship despite God's apparent absence. "Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help" (Psalm 22:11). This strained connection, however, can be our hope. Our suffering may lead to a deeper understanding of our connection to a suffering humanity, a suffering world and, quite possibly, a suffering God.



When did you feel the absence of God? How do suffering and discrimination impact a relationship with God? In what ways has suffering influenced the faith of those in the LGBT community?

Read **Hebrews 4:12-16**. "The word of God," the word of truth, reveals the depth of our soul's longing for God. Whether that word is one of anguish and despair, or one of hope for healing and transformation, it is "living and active" and "piercing" (Hebrews 4:12). As the biblical words of God were born out of an oppressed community, today's LGBT community is pregnant with words of truth out of our liberation struggle. At the same time, God's word calls us to be vulnerable before God, and to always, actively, examine the intentions of our own hearts (Hebrews 4:12, 13).



What is the word of truth that your soul longs to hear today? In what areas of your life do you tend not to listen for the word of God? How does this passage both comfort and challenge you?

For the writer of Hebrews, Jesus is a model of both boldness and vulnerability. He has been put to the test. Verse 15 recalls Jesus' temptation in the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry. Because of his own temptations, he is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses" (verse 15). Yet he was fully faithful to his divine vocation throughout. Because "he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested" (Hebrews 2:18).



What challenges do you face in attempting to remain faithful to whom God is calling you to be? What challenges is your faith community facing in its attempt to be faithful?

Mark 10:17-31 presents those who are privileged, LGBT and non-LGBT, with a difficult lesson. Oftentimes we hear this hard teaching and turn away sad. The rich man stands in a place of privilege in his society, yet earnestly desires to live fully. Jesus, in his compassion, shows the man that in order to experience his fullness of life he must sacrifice his privilege for the good of the marginalized. Only then will his path be clear to follow Jesus faithfully. Here we see that our own comfort and luxuries may indeed be obstacles to living into the Reign of God.



What holds us back in our commitment to the Reign of God? What keeps us from greater work for justice for LGBT people?

Jesus continues in this passage to recognize those who have paid a dear price for the sake of the gospel (Mark 10:28-31). When Peter declares that those who follow Jesus left everything in order to do so, Jesus responds with reassurance. He promises their lives will be the fullest of lives (even listing a hundredfold return of wealth, family and land) now and in eternal life. Does this reassurance ring true for those who continue to suffer great losses in our world? What is the quality of life, the fullness of life, of one devoted to Christ? This tough question returns us to the cry of the psalmist in Psalm 22 and that of Job.



What sacrifices have we made to follow God faithfully? How have we received "a hundred times as much"? For what are you grateful?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Psalm 22:1 can be used to create a prayer or litany that directly confronts God with your own despair about LGBT concerns in congregational, denominational, national or global settings.

Gather discouraging statements you have heard or read directed toward LGBT people or issues. After reading each statement aloud, then pray, lamenting:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

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29th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Proper 24), Year B

CALLED BY GOD

"God, who did you call us to be?" is the prayer we bring to these Scriptures. It's a prayer about our identity, rather than simply behavior.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:
[Job 38:1-7, \(34-41\) and Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c](#)
[or Isaiah 53:4-12 and Psalm 91:9-16 \(not included in this conversation\); Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"What does it say when the church turns away those who are called by God?"
Rachel Allen



"The passage from Job suggests a caution to us against arrogant and oppressive claims on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues." Eu Kit Lim



"Death, resurrection and new life in Jesus are all about living into the possibility of the impossible." Lorraine Leist

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The popular Sunday school song “Jesus Loves Me” informs us that Jesus loves me because “the Bible tells me so.” Eu Kit Lim, an Asian man from an evangelical background, points out the he has experienced an emphasis placed more on “the Bible tells me so” than on “Jesus loves me.” Such an approach to Scripture adheres to the Bible as infallible words instead of Scripture that challenges and comforts as liberating Word. Unfortunately, the more narrow understanding of Scripture has been used as justification to oppress and marginalize others, specifically the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Many people have heard many arguments against sexual orientation boil down to a “the Bible tells me so” literal line of reasoning.

Job 38:1-7 (34-41) presents cautionary words to those who assume they know exactly what God thinks about LGBT people. When virtuous Job was faced with overwhelming losses in his life, he asked God, “Why do you hide your face, and count me as your enemy?” (Job 13:24). What follows in the book are responses to the question by Job’s “friends” who offer traditional answers as “people suffer because they are bad people.” The answers just don’t work for the honest-to-goodness righteous Job. In the passage for today, God responds. Out of the whirlwind, God questions Job’s place to examine the holy one who “laid the foundation of the earth” (Job 38:2). God reminds Job of God’s profound and mysterious acts of creation. (**Psalms 104**, in a similar way, is a song of thanksgiving detailing the vast work of God the creator.) Job, only later, much later, in the book, responds to God’s challenge. When he responds, he says, “I have uttered what I do not understand, things too wonderful for me — which I did not know” (Job 42:3).

How might Job’s delayed answer to God’s questions inform us of our claims on the Bible? If Job was unable to respond with “absolute understanding” when faced with God’s mysterious creation, how are we to fully respond to the intricacies and mysteries of God-given human sexuality? Do judgments based on literal interpretations of Scripture (by those, like Job’s friends, who claim “to have our best interest”) ever fully grasp God’s creative and mysterious purposes? Finally, how does one’s social location, race and gender influence, expand or limit the way we interpret the Bible?



What is the range of explanations that you have heard regarding sexual orientation? With which explanation do you most agree, and with which do you most differ? Where is God in your understanding?

Hebrews 5:1-10 examines the priesthood and an understanding of Jesus in the distinctive role as a high priest. For those whose congregations and denominations still do not recognize the ministry of or ordain LGBT people, we listen closely to this text. First the passage describes a ministry or priesthood that is not an easy one. It is a life of sacrificial offering and pastoral care and teaching (Hebrews 5:1-3). What stands out for us is verse 4, which states that one does not take on the honor and duties of such a priesthood unless called by God. The crunch comes,

however, when one deeply believes one is gifted and called by God, but because of sexual orientation, God's calling is dismissed.

Rachel Allen states she has watched as friends were turned away from their calling within the United Methodist Church. She knows the statement in the denomination's Social Principles that says that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." And so Rachel wonders why the church turns away those who are called by God. What does it mean when the church denies someone's calling? How can those within the LGBT community acknowledge and affirm their calling to serve the Christian community in substantial ways, both within and outside organized religion? What does it mean to be both gifted by God as an LGBT person of faith and called to serve the Christian community? In Hebrews, Jesus' appointment to the priesthood begins with the words, "You are my child, today I have begotten you." God then declares, "You are a priest forever" (Hebrews 5:5, 6). Those words to Jesus can offer strength to those who seek to fully live out their ministry, especially LGBT people.



How does one's sexuality and sexual orientation influence how one responds to God's call to ministry (for both laity and clergy)? What is your experience of God's call to ministry and the church's recognition of that call?

Throughout **Mark 10:35-45** we hear Jesus' question, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" (Mark 10:38). For Jesus, with his death not far off, both service and suffering are poured into that cup. When have LGBT people tasted from the Jesus cup? What is our deepest desire? Is it for wholeness or is it, as for the disciples in this passage, to grasp for a place of privilege (verse 37)? It is tough and necessary to discern, especially after years of discrimination and suffering, a just yearning for equality from a craving for power or privilege that oppresses others who long for God's care. Equality, and the life of faith, do not exclude anyone from suffering or service. Yet equality can lead to wholeness.

Jesus drank from the cup of salvation. Salvation means to heal, to be made whole. For Jesus, wholeness included service, suffering, death, as well as resurrection. How can the Church be made whole? Jesus asks, "Can you be baptized in the baptism that I am baptized with?" Jesus was baptized by the water of new life. In responding to James and John, Jesus asks if we, the Church, can also be baptized into a new life. Death, resurrection and new life in Jesus are all about living into the possibility of the impossible. All is possible in Jesus. Can you imagine a Church where all share in one another's suffering, serve others and enjoy the fullness of salvation? This Scripture is asking us whether the Church can live into the possibility of a new life, where all drink from the cup, where all are whole, and all are welcome.



What does it mean today when Jesus invites you and your church to "drink from the cup that I drink"? What difference, if any, does it make for LGBT people to drink from that cup?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Gracious and Loving God,
You made the mountains and the valleys.
You told the waters where to be.
Your power and reign are amazing to witness.
You called us to serve you.
Some you called to the priesthood, just as you called Aaron.
Yet despite this, we continually ask for more.
We ask to be allowed to sit at your side — to be in your favor.
We try to place ourselves at your level.
Forgive us.
We do not fully understand all that you have done
Nor do we know all that you are doing.
Help us, however, to see small glimmers of your truth that will light our way.
Confident of our call from you,
Guide us to boldly, humbly, serve you and others.
Amen.

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30th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Proper 25), Year B

TROUBLE DON'T LAST ALWAYS

These passages speak to the hope that is always present in the midst of marginalization because of God's presence in our lives.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Job 42:1-6, 10-17 and Psalm 34:1-8 \(19-22\) or Jeremiah 31:7-9 and Psalm 126 \(not included in this week's conversation\); Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"When people we care about question our beliefs and actions, it is easy to embody their negative energy and feel bad about ourselves. We are called to reject belittling inner thoughts and to embrace ourselves as both loved and called by God." Deborah A. Appler



"The story of Job reminds us that we must resist befriending the alienation that suffering pushes us toward." Elcindor Johnson

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The reading from **Job 42:1-17** concludes the biblical story of Job — who suffered unimaginably despite being a righteous person. He bore health problems, the loss of children and isolation from his community. To make matters worse, he never received an explanation for why he experienced so much abuse.

It is a harsh reality of life that our suffering often goes unexplained. It is tempting for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people to ask why so much hostility and shame is directed at us. Unfortunately this question is usually met with silence or, worse yet, feeble attempts from others to explain the inexplicable. Many times we become self-loathing and internalize negative attitudes imposed on us by others. While we may be marginalized by society, we must try, like Job, to avoid internalizing it.

Although most modern translations of verse 6 read a variation of: “I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6 as found in The New Revised Standard Version), a more faithful translation is: “I reject and am sorry for dust and ashes.” Like Job, we are called to trust in our own goodness and embodiment of God’s image and to refuse to feel bad about ourselves no matter what others say. Job stands firm in his belief of innocence and is restored to his rightful place in society. It is Job who must intercede for his three friends who speak wrong about him and about God — the ones whose advice often leads him to question his own goodness and relationship to God (Job 42:8, 9).



When have you internalized other people’s negative attitudes about you?

One problem with marginalization and suffering is that it often leads to fear. Paradoxically, the most helpful response to fear is inquiry and worship. In **Psalms 34:1-8**, the psalmist emphasizes in verse 4 that seeking a relationship with God offers freedom from fear in the midst of adversity. While some denominations wrestle with votes about whether God has called LGBT believers into ordained ministry, others, in the name of “ex-gay” therapy, question whether we actually even exist (positing that we are misformed heterosexuals). These efforts at dehumanizing us can easily cause us to become distracted and despondent. Before we can take a stand against injustice, we must first be delivered from our fear. God is the source of our strength and deliverance from fear as we stand against suffering and injustice in the world around us.



In the midst of adversity, where have you taken refuge? When and how has God been your refuge?

In **Hebrews 7:23-28**, we see Jesus Christ as a priest, who — by so thoroughly offering himself to God (verse 27) — delivers those who come to him. We can approach God with confidence

because Christ, the suffering servant, lives to intercede for us. God is not untouched by our suffering. Jesus saw the brutality that religion can inflict as he observed the plight of those deemed unclean by the religious authorities of his day. Even more poignant, Jesus experienced the cruelty of hatred and the violence that is done to human bodies in the name of religion. Jesus overcame and lives to call and empower LGBT people, as all people, to let go of fear and marginalization and to step into our calling as members of God's family.



In what ways does the suffering of Jesus seem to connect with the suffering of God's people today?

Despite our struggles we must remember not to internalize our marginalization. In **Mark 10:46-52**, Bartimaeus, who was blind, refuses to sit silently as Jesus passes by. He shouts louder for Jesus as the crowd tries to silence him. When Jesus calls to him, he throws off his beggar's cloak, approaches Jesus and receives his sight. How odd that those who truly cannot see, cannot understand, in this story are those who sternly try to silence Bartimaeus (Mark 10:48).

Like Job, Bartimaeus refuses to comply and internalize his marginalization. He refuses to let others tell him that he is not worthy to speak to Jesus. We should remember Bartimaeus' example as LGBT folks. Bartimaeus is not the only person in the story who needs healing. He is physically challenged, but those who try to prevent him from reaching Jesus are in need of spiritual healing. Despite all that is going on to silence and marginalize the LGBT community, we must resist buying into those false beliefs about who and whose we are. Many of us shake our heads in disbelief as we observe the hysteria of those who would rather we just went away. Efforts for constitutional amendments, religious trials, threats of denominational schisms seem like a lot of energy to expend trying to exclude us. Given the entire hullabaloo, it is easy to understand why we characterize it as "homophobia."

In the midst of all that, we bear witness to the Spirit of Christ alive in us and should not be overwhelmed or defeated with denominational pronouncements or constitutional amendments. While the final outcome of these efforts does matter to our daily lives, we must also remember that those who oppose us are the very ones Christ has called us to love and serve. Moreover, we are not the only ones brutalized by religious hostility and indifference. There are many non-LGBT people who are also cast aside because of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, class or ability. We must not become so focused on our own struggles that we forget to take time to advocate for others who are marginalized.



Where do you hear people of faith, particularly those in the LGBT community, speaking out in spite of stern attempts to silence them?

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PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy One,
in the midst of suffering,
help us to resist the depression and marginalization
that suffering can bring.
In difficult times help us to remember
who and whose we are in You
and to live with hope
because of your unfailing love.
Amen.

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All Saints Sunday, Year B

LIVES OF THE SAINTS

All Saints Day celebrates those who have worked diligently for a just community in Christ. One does not become a saint by taking the easy route.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 or Isaiah 25:6-9 and Psalm 24;](#)
[Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION



A conversation among the following scholars and pastors

"Saints are those willing to stand firm in their quest for God's justice regardless of personal cost. The good news is that saints rarely work alone. They are under God's constant protection." Deborah A. Appler



"Our world will not grow more loving and peaceable without courageous, sacrificial action." Elcindor Johnson

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Each of today's passages speaks to the hope that is always possible through faith. There is a holy promise, an eschatological hope, from God for those who walk faithfully and truthfully even when such actions lead to sacrifice and ridicule. As lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, the struggle to live lives openly is often laced with discrimination in employment, housing, health care and numerous other areas. It leads many to live closeted lives just to maintain the basic level of physical and financial security necessary for survival. Likewise straight supporters, especially those in faith communities, often hesitate or refuse to publicly mediate God's blessings on LGBT relationships or advocate for their ordination for fear of losing church credentials.



For what are you willing to sacrifice or even risk your own life?

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 describes God's care for those who remain faithful even through "torments" (verse 3) and times of testing (verse 5). The passage reminds us that sometimes it hurts to stand up for what is right. Many people think the righteous are crazy and cut them off as dead to them (verse 2), not unlike what happens when biological and faith families slam doors on their LGBT brothers and sisters. Yet those who stand up for justice are eternally in God's hands and at peace with who they are and what they believe. LGBT communities and their supporters might be thrown into the "refiner's furnace" (verse 6). In the end, however, God's grace and mercy are upon these "holy ones" (verse 9). They will shine brightly and passionately in perfect union with God in a life of holiness. Our faith calls us to embrace and illuminate who we are.

Psalms 24 perhaps was used by the Hebrews as a processional hymn. What leads us to a holy place? The psalm reminds us that a life of holiness requires us to live lives free from falsehood and deceit in order to approach worship with "clean hands and pure hearts" (verse 4). For the LGBT community, the challenge to live openly, to "not lift up their souls to what is false" (verse 4), is often one of life and death. For others, the consequences of coming out or being an open straight supporter are an immense challenge, but not as dire. We face discomfort, strained relationships and other difficulties, but the general shape of our lives will remain intact — even blessed (verse 5).

While no one can make the coming out decision for anyone else, we each should ask ourselves about the contribution our silence adds to the pain of others. By being honest with ourselves and others we help God create places of joy and destroy the shroud of hate, disgrace, intolerance, tears and death that is cast over our communities (**Isaiah 25:6-9**).



How does silence about the lives of LGBT people of faith contribute to a shroud of despair, hate and discrimination? Where do you see God lifting shrouds of death and offering blessing?

When Jesus raises Lazarus in **John 11:32-44**, he reveals his glory and true identity as the giver of life and true child of God. In a sense, he completely comes out. Jesus, angry at the unbelief of the people and at death that causes so much pain, goes to the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus has the stone removed where Lazarus lay dead for four long days.

There is great symbolic power for our LGBT community in the words and actions that follow. Jesus stands outside the tomb, thanks God for what he is about to do and shouts, “Lazarus, come out!” (verse 43). Lazarus, whose face is bound forcing him to silence, whose legs and arms are wrapped keeping him from moving, is liberated from death, rid of the bonds and set free. There were consequences for Jesus’ action. Many became believers (verse 45) but the officials decided that Jesus must die (verse 53).

The costs of breaking silence and doing justice cannot be minimized. Yet, when each of us decides to live openly, we add one more voice to the chorus and make it that much easier for others to find freedom from the pain of their isolation. The LGBT communities and their supporters, particularly in nations more hospitable, have an opportunity to help liberate LGBT people around the world who live with fear we cannot imagine. It is reasonable to argue that the LGBT community and its supporters in the United States have the most political power to bring to bear on the injustice millions of LGBT people suffer around the world. When we choose to stop hiding from family, friends, employers and faith communities, we chip away at the foundation of hatred and bigotry that keeps so many in our community from living holy lives. Fear is dispelled because we trust in the promise of new life, rebirth, a conquering of death that comes from God to the faithful.



In what ways do you connect with Jesus’ command, “Lazarus, come out!”

Revelation 21:1-6a was written during a time of extreme persecution, perhaps under the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 C.E.). People risked their lives to live faithfully and justly. This passage is God’s life-giving alternative vision to the church and a people beaten down. No longer will the faithful live in places of injustice, discrimination, death and tears, but rather in God’s new and holy city. Both heaven and earth are transformed (Revelation 21:1, 3). God chooses to live in the midst of the people in this city, now filled with laughter and joy. All those who fight against the forces of oppression are invited in (Revelation 21:7).

We are asked to notice places where persecution, injustice and violence seem to have the day. When and where have people suffered persecution for their faith, including those within the LGBT community? We can lift up an alternative vision of God’s world. We can live in that holy city today when we support one another in community — we do not have to be faithful alone.



What impact might God's promise to "wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4) have on those who are persecuted or dying, including our LGBT sisters and brothers?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Redeemer,
you risked it all to love those who hated you.
You present us with a great cloud of saints
who have gone before us
as witnesses to your divine love.
Help us to love as you did, and they did,
with reckless abandon and holy wisdom.
Give us courage when standing for love's demands.
Provide us the strength to persevere
even in those times
when it means risking it all.
Amen.

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31st Sunday of Ordinary Time (Proper 26), Year B

GATHERED FOR GOD

The Bible witnesses this week to the redemptive possibilities within loving families that are gifts from God and protected by God's holy laws.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Ruth 1:1-18 and Psalm 146 or Deuteronomy 6:1-9](#)
[and Psalm 119:1-8; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"We model God's law when we protect all families." Elcindor Johnson



"The Bible's view of Ruth and Naomi's total commitment to each other reminds us that redemption occurs in all loving families, biological or chosen." Deborah A. Appler

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Ruth 1:1-18 sets up the dire situation for three women, Ruth, Naomi and Orpah, who live in Moab. These women struggle for survival after the untimely deaths of their husbands, and sit on the margins of society. While Orpah obeys Naomi's request for her daughter-in-laws to return to their parental homes (Ruth 1:14, 15), Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi (Ruth 1:16-18). As Ruth follows Naomi back to Judah she faces life as an outcast among outcasts because of her status as a reviled Moabite and both of the women's lack of living sons and husbands. While societal norms discourage Ruth and Naomi from forming their partnership, they choose each other. Ruth has a chance to return to her mother's house and, perhaps, marry another man. Instead, she rejects the potential for opposite-sex marriage, choosing to forsake her biological family, her gods, her land, to cleave to Naomi until death (verses 16 and 17).

Throughout the Hebrew Scripture, the word "cleave" or "clung," found in verse 14, often denotes an intimate relationship (as marriage in Genesis 2:24 or a covenant with God in Deuteronomy 10:20, 11:22). The relationship between Ruth and Naomi is one of loyal love (the Hebrew word *hesed*). It is like God's loyal love for Israel that remains constant even when the relationship gets tough. If we read further in Ruth we see that the covenant between Ruth and Naomi does not end when Ruth marries Boaz. The child that Ruth bears is recognized in the community as Naomi's (4:17). Naomi sets Obed "in her bosom and becomes his nurse" (4:16). There is redemption in this family because Ruth and Naomi chose to create their own family and care for each other without ceasing. Likewise, there is redemption in the love that flows in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) families despite societal attempts to separate us.



In what ways did you "choose" your family?
How was God in that decision? Traditional or non-traditional, where have you seen loving and holy families?

Redemption in Ruth also occurs because Ruth, Naomi and Boaz are faithful to Israelite law that embodies God's love and justice. Ruth and Naomi are able to eat because gleaners must leave behind food for the poor (Ruth 2:1-9, Deuteronomy 24:21). Boaz's faithfulness to levirate law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) makes him willing to serve as a *go'el*, a redeemer. He marries Ruth (and Naomi) to provide a child (and a name for his dead kinsman) as well as protection for the women. Israelite law, a gift from God, provides protection for the family, even for a non-traditional family with an Israelite husband and Moabite wife. As in ancient Israel, laws are needed in our society to protect non-traditional families.



How does your faith community support LGBT families?

The difficult passage to grasp in **Hebrews 9:11-14** connects in a surprising way with this story of Ruth and Naomi. The redemptive blood of Christ (Hebrews 9:12), that flows to all humanity, is from a bloodline born out of a non-traditional family. In Matthew 1:1 and 5, we discover Boaz, Orbed and Ruth the Moabite, Naomi's surrogate through levirate law, are ancestors of Jesus the Messiah.

Other lectionary texts for this Sunday focus directly on the importance of biblical law and how it protects and redeems God's family. Hebrew law is a gift from God, not a burden. **Psalm 146** offers thanks to God for God's faithfulness and appeals to the prophetic and legal witness (Isaiah 58, Exodus 21-23) in Israel that requires people of faith to protect the oppressed and marginalized.

Psalm 119:1-8 extols the happiness that results from following these laws and creating just communities. Legal protections for the marginalized are important to God, as is evident in **Deuteronomy 6:1-9**, which contains the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Moses reminds us that God alone is God and that we should love God with our entire being. This devotion assumes commitment to the law given at Sinai since it serves as an essential blueprint for constructing a land of promise even today. Only when we are willing to create communities in which power is shared and all are treated with justice and righteousness can there be true peace. To ensure that the law is ever in the minds of the people, Moses commands that signs of the law (mezuzahs and phylacteries) be displayed on doorposts, gates, wrists and foreheads.



What signs remind you and your community of God's covenant with you and the law?

In **Mark 12:28-34**, a scribe asks Jesus to define the most important commandment. Jesus responds that the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) is the first, and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) is the second. These commandments summarize the law and define what it means to be faithful and loving in community. One cannot love God if one intentionally hurts his or her neighbor. Taking the law seriously requires that people strive to care about just relationships where people are protected from hate and violence. Loving relationships and families are God's blessing to the world in whatever shape they take. Jesus affirms this and our legislatures should as well.



What pending legislation exists in your state to protect LGBT families? In what ways might Jesus' command to love God and neighbor shape your understanding of civic law?

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PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Faithful and loving God,
help us promote your desire
for laws and policies
that protect those who are marginalized.
You have created loving and faithful families
within the LGBT community.
May your command to love others move all people
to cherish and protect the holy bonds
that you have fashioned among your people.
Amen.

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32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time (Proper 27), Year B

WIDOWS' WITNESS

From the margins, come powerful witnesses of great faith. Watch and listen for God in the lives of those who live in various expressions of family and kinship.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17 and Psalm 127; or 1 Kings 17:8-16 and Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"In Mark 12, a widow re-presents a deeper faith-walk than those who are supposed to instruct the community. So also, some LGBT folk have re-presented structures of family, or even of marriage, in healthier ways than those who claim to have divine rights to be in such structures." Bentley de Bardelaben



"Paying careful attention to details of these passages, we discover the importance of learning from those who are most marginalized by dominant structures of family and kinship."
Ken Stone



"Our culture attempts to define family in more narrow ways than many of us actually experience. These texts open our hearts to acknowledge and rejoice in broader definitions of family." Holly Toensing

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Several of this week's passages involve widows. In the ancient world, widows usually existed outside the male-headed household. Their survival and well-being were therefore often at risk. Yet Jesus indicates in **Mark 12:38-44** that, even though circumstances placed widows beyond the dominant family and social structures of their day, these marginal figures sometimes represented better models for the life of faith than the more respected religious leaders. Thus, modern people of faith, especially those who also find themselves outside traditional social and family structures (including lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people), are reminded by these passages that religious integrity and God's approval and protection are available to those on the margins of social and religious institutions.

In the relationship between Ruth and Naomi found in **Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17**, we see what has today become a model for committed relationships. Without husbands or sons, however, Ruth and Naomi lived a precarious existence in the patriarchal world of the ancient Near East. As the alternate reading from **1 Kings 17:8-16** indicates, widows without adult men in their households were vulnerable to poverty and hunger. Moreover, Ruth was a Moabite rather than an Israelite when she traveled to Israel with Naomi. Moabites are much disliked in the Bible, and Moabite women in particular are viewed with suspicion. In spite of their marginal family, gender and ethnic positions, however, Naomi and Ruth took bold steps to ensure their own survival. Indeed, some of the actions suggested by Naomi and taken by Ruth would have been considered shocking.



Why might lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people find it useful to explore characters such as Ruth and Naomi?

Several biblical texts speak against intermarriage between Israelite men and Moabite women. Thus, the union between Ruth and Boaz could have been deemed improper by those adopting a literal approach to biblical marriage traditions. Moreover, the women of the town, rather than his parents, name the son of Boaz and Ruth. The texts also underscore the love between Ruth and Naomi, and attribute Ruth's son to Naomi even though Naomi is not his biological relative. In addition, descent is usually traced through male lines in the Bible. Whereas another of today's readings, **Psalms 127**, associates the joy of childbirth with biological fathers, **Ruth 4:13-17**

associates that joy with women, non-biological kinship and the wider community. The book of Ruth appears to redefine accepted family relationships by bringing together partners who are normally kept apart, creating kinship lines outside of biology. The book grants roles to women that are usually associated with men, placing the family in a wider communal context. By linking Ruth not only to David but also (in Matthew 1:5) to Jesus, the Bible indicates that non-traditional configurations of family and gender are at the heart of Scripture.



In what ways are LGBT people redefining accepted family relationships?

As in the time of Naomi and Ruth, so also today, some relationships and household configurations are viewed with suspicion. Many people of faith are hesitant to accept or learn from redefinitions of family that are taking place among LGBT people. Indeed, many individuals in positions of religious authority assert that such redefinitions are incompatible with Christian doctrine and practice. In spite of the fact that, as **Hebrews 9** indicates, Christians confess that God in Christ has removed sin once and for all (verse 26), such authorities continue to single out as sinners those whose lives do not conform to dominant household and gender practices.

Mark 12:38-44 indicates, however, that individuals in positions of authority are not always reliable models for Christian practice. Jesus contrasts the scribes — male religious authorities who would normally be granted honor and respect — with a woman who finds herself in the marginalized position of widow, as did Ruth and Naomi. After pointing out that scribes often exploit widows while making long prayers, Jesus calls attention to a widow and indicates that she acts more appropriately than others. If the disciples of Jesus are directed toward the widow rather than the scribes as a model for practice, so also communities of faith today may have more to learn from LGBT people than from those religious authorities who harass them.



Where is the place of power and authority in your community of faith? What challenging words might God say to those in leadership through the faithful witness of those on the margins?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of Ruth and Naomi,
God of widows and foreigners,
teach us all to be more open today
to the truth that you bring us
from unexpected quarters.
Amen.

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33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time (Proper 28), Year B

HANNAH AND HER SONG

What happens when you enter the world of Hannah and hear her song? God delivers and calls us to do justice.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[1 Samuel 1:4-20 and 1 Samuel 2:1-10; or Daniel 12:1-3 and Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14 \(15-18\) 19-25; Mark 13:1-8](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The story of Hannah shows that unhappiness and persecution around sex, gender and family matters are not new. However, they also speak to God's desire to right these and other wrongs." Ken Stone



"Many in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community are reminded regularly that we don't 'measure up' to heterosexual society's expectations. These readings show how the opinions of others drastically shape our views of ourselves. Yet they also remind us of life, love and justice." Holly Toensing



"The need to feel or be validated as a human being is important for all people no matter their sexual orientation, gender identity, race, creed, faith or economic situation. For many today, as for Hannah, having children is one route toward such validation. No institution, religious or otherwise, should have the authority to deny such basic human rights." Bentley de Bardelaben

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

1 Samuel 1:4-10 and **1 Samuel 2:1-10** focus on Hannah, a woman who suffers much unhappiness because she has no children. Examining Hannah's story, we are reminded that, in spite of the direct continuity some readers wish to make between the biblical world and modern religious communities, ancient Israel was characterized by many practices related to gender and kinship that are quite different from modern ones. Like many men in the Hebrew Bible (such as Abraham, Jacob and David), Hannah's husband, Elkanah, has more than one wife. His other wife is named Peninnah.



How do you interpret Scripture for our lives today? At a time when Christians argue over the literal use of the Bible as a source for Christian ethics, how do you understand numerous biblical references, including **1 Samuel**, that suggest acceptable practices of polygamy?

Peninnah has given birth to sons and daughters while Hannah has none. The importance granted to childbirth in Israel no doubt led many women to experience the failure to bear children as a great tragedy. Indeed, while Elkanah attempts to assure Hannah that her worth does not depend upon giving birth, Hannah's own perception of her situation has been so thoroughly shaped by Israel's emphasis on childbirth that she weeps and is unable to eat or drink. Dominant social expectations about gender and family undermine her happiness and self-esteem. Moreover, Peninnah persecutes Hannah for what might have been seen as Hannah's failure as a woman.



In what ways do LGBT people fail to conform to dominant expectations about gender and kinship? How does such failure threaten one's happiness and self-esteem, or lead to persecution by others?

Hannah's unhappiness is brought to an end by God when she gives birth to Samuel. Although her distress involves matters of gender, household and family, her song of praise has a much wider scope. Her joy leads her to praise the God who not only gives children to the barren, but also "raises up the poor" and "lifts the needy" (1 Samuel 2:7-8). She is not concerned only about her own liberation, but speaks also about the liberation of others. In this respect, Hannah offers a model to those today who desire relief from unhappiness and persecution. Similarly to Hannah, LGBT people sometimes experience the realm of family, gender and sexual matters as a source of unhappiness and may call upon God for assistance. However, Hannah's example in prayer warns all of us against excessive preoccupation with our own situation. A desire for justice for ourselves should lead to a desire for justice for others.



How can LGBT people today express the same concern about justice for the poor and lowly as Hannah shows in her prayer?

Like the other readings for today, Hannah's prayer emphasizes the biblical hope that divine intervention will set right the wrongs of this world. Texts like Hannah's prayer have long offered hope and encouragement for those who are led by religious beliefs to struggle for justice and against oppression. They inform expectations for future interventions by God, such as we find in the reading from **Mark 13:1-8**.

Yet many readers are also uncomfortable with elements of these texts, such as the distinction sometimes made between those who are destined for everlasting life and those who are destined for everlasting contempt (as we see, for example, in the reading from **Daniel 12:1-3**). After all, the distinction between those who deserve everlasting life and those who deserve everlasting contempt can easily be used to justify disdain for those whose lives do not conform to dominant norms, including LGBT people.

In reading such texts, it is helpful to keep in mind the good news found both in Hannah's song and the Christian confession in **Hebrews 10**. For those who are persecuted and brought down, God raises them up (1 Samuel 2:6-8). In **Hebrews 10**, Christ has "offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins" (10:12). Forgiveness is both necessary for all, and also available to all. The passages call into question the tendency of some to put particular classes of people beyond the bounds of God's love.

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of Hannah, remember again, today,
those who despair and are persecuted
because of sexual and family matters.
May each of us recall
that all of us are forgiven by you,
and follow the admonition
'to provoke one another to love and good deeds' (Hebrews 10:24).
Amen.

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Thanksgiving Day, Year B

GIVING THANKS FOR REAL

Sometimes “thank you” is never expressed, or, when it is said, simply rolls off the tongue, a matter of manners only. What is the depth of thanksgiving expressed in the readings for this day? Is real thanksgiving possible for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Joel 2:21-27](#); [Psalm 126](#); [1 Timothy 2:1-7](#);
[Matthew 6:25-33](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"These readings help all of us to rejoice in the ways that God has been 'in the midst' of our lives. But the readings also remind us that our calls to God for relief are never far away. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks know this all too well." Holly Toensing



"It may take a lifetime for most human beings, whether LGBT or heterosexual, to achieve trust in our relationship to the Divine Creator who cares for us. But God has promised to supply our needs even though it may not feel like it in the moment." Bentley de Bardelaben



"On a day for thanksgiving, these passages remind us that God's desire to bless extends to everyone. The passages also encourage us to strive for a 'kingdom of God' in which everyone would have reason to give thanks, not only a privileged few." Ken Stone

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Today's reading from Joel 2:21-27 urges its audience to "be glad and rejoice" (verse 21) over God's good gifts. Such an admonition seems appropriate for a text selected for reading on Thanksgiving Day. However, holidays such as Thanksgiving are often difficult times for people who find themselves marginalized by or within family, church and society. Depression, suffering and even suicides are actually quite common at such times.



What factors can make it difficult for LGBT people to "be glad and rejoice" on holidays such as Thanksgiving?

Although modern readers are sometimes uncomfortable with expressions of unhappiness (often dismissed as "whining"), numerous biblical texts testify to the validity of laments about suffering. Such laments are especially common in the psalms. Even today's reading from Psalm 126, though focused on joy and laughter, acknowledges the reality of weeping. Thus, biblical calls to praise do not entail an ignorance or denial of suffering. They do, however, presuppose that suffering can be turned into happiness and that "those who go out weeping" can "come home with shouts of joy" (verse 5). They do not speak about a thanksgiving that hides from the realities of suffering. Rather, they speak about a thanksgiving for the transformation and blessing that can lead from suffering to joy.

The affirmation of Joel 2:21-22 that even the soil and the animals have reason to look forward to God's blessing shows that such blessings are available to everyone. Indeed, this point is made as well in the readings from 1 Timothy 2:1-7, which urge their readers to offer prayers and thanksgiving for everyone; and in Matthew 6:25-33, which extend God's care even to the birds and the flowers. God's desire to bless is, in these passages, universal, and certainly includes LGBT people.



For what blessings do LGBT folk hope and work? For what blessings do LGBT folk already have reason to be thankful?

The admonition in 1 Timothy 2:1 “that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone” reminds those who wish to exclude or discriminate against LGBT people that God’s care extends to everyone, and not only to individuals whose lives conform to narrow notions of proper sex, gender and family. On the other hand, such an admonition serves as a useful reminder to them, not only of God’s desire to bless them, but also of God’s desire to bless others. For example, as the readings from Joel and Matthew indicate, the biblical tradition consistently represents God as caring about the welfare of those who need food, clothing and other basic necessities.

If we take seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:25-33, we need not worry excessively about our own circumstances or become preoccupied with our own food and clothing but rather should strive for “the kingdom of God.” Since God’s realm is, in the biblical tradition, characterized by justice for everyone, our work toward that realm involves not only the struggle for equal rights for LGBT people, but also struggles against poverty, racial injustice, sexism and violence. A world in which all such struggles achieve their goals would truly be cause for thanksgiving.



How can LGBT folk and their allies strive for a “kingdom of God” that is truly inclusive of everyone and truly a reason to give thanks?

Though it is easy to imagine that such a world is unrealistic, Christians are reminded by today’s Gospel passage of the importance of trust in God. Indeed, taking all of these passages together, we can conclude that trust and thanksgiving go together. When we trust God as the one who desires our blessing, while simultaneously striving for God’s inclusive realm, we find ourselves experiencing the joy and laughter in the present about which these texts speak.

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God who feeds the animals and clothes the flowers,
God who desires to bless us all,
remind us on this day of Thanksgiving
to strive first for your realm,
in which justice and equality,
laughter and joy, are available to everyone.
Amen.

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Reign of Christ Sunday (Proper 29), Year B

THE REIGN OF GOD'S JUSTICE AND LOVE

The victorious conclusion of the church year is marked as Reign of Christ Sunday. Amid the trumpet blasts of triumphant images, listen for the persistent whispers of the promise of liberation, justice, truth and peace.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[1 Samuel 23:1-7 and Psalm 132:1-12; or Daniel 7:9-10 and Psalm 132:1-12 \(13-18\); Revelation 1:4b-8; and John 18:33-37](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"When I start to consider how recent constitutional amendments and decrees have hurt LGBT folks, I find some of my rights are cracked and crumbled. It would be quite novel to have some certainty, as the psalmist suggests, that decrees come from a place of holiness. (Psalm 93:5)." April Baker



"What does it mean to claim that this figure is 'one like a human being' (Daniel 7:13)? What does it mean, finally, to be human, particularly in politically charged contexts in which some people are only too willing to see those of another sexual orientation, or religion, or ethnic background, as less than fully human?" Sandra Hack Polaski



"I want God to be the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end. I don't want those who oppress and discriminate to have the last word spoken to LGBT people. I don't want God to wipe out the persecutor, but rather to make good on the promise to dwell with us and to 'wipe away every tear.' Death, mourning and pain be no more." (Revelation 21:4) Sidney D. Fowler

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Daniel 7:9-10 sets before us the image of God as “Ancient One.” With that image in our hearts and minds, we can envision many aspects of God that illuminate that image. They might include: a wise elder with a gentle yet firm way of teaching about life; a loving grandmother with a full flowing skirt with folds that provide safe places for hiding and secure places for snuggling; and an old man whittling a piece of cast-off wood into an intricate design, dispelling any notion of idleness that is mistaken for serenity. Yet all these aspects of the Ancient One seem to disappear when we encounter Daniel’s arbiter of justice sitting on his great throne being served by the masses. The shift in image needs to be examined for both how it has been used to ruthlessly judge others, and also to proclaim God’s justice and liberation. In **2 Samuel 23:1-7** and **Psalms 132**, we may also examine how God’s justice and covenant may or may not be extended through political power as that of the reign of David.

In the book of Daniel, the Hebrew people under the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes (167–164 B.C.E.) needed hope. Likewise, God’s royal majesty and strength described in **Psalms 93** can be comforting if your place in life leaves you at the mercy of those who are in power. When God’s people are persecuted, they look for a strong liberator. At moments of persecution and discrimination, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have longed for such liberation — a clear, strong victory. The language of Daniel’s vision assures God’s people that God’s justice does reign — it is a dominion that will not pass away. God acts definitively.



In what ways is the image of God as conquering liberator and ruler good news for you or for your congregation?
What other images need to supplement this one?

Revelation 1:4b-8 also may lead us to an unfailing hope. If only we could comprehend what Jesus was trying to tell us and live it, we would finally be cooperating with God’s realm of justice and peace. In Revelation, paradise isn’t lost forever or only attainable after we die. “Every eye will see him” (verse 7) implies that all of us will see the incarnation of love itself in Jesus and no longer have to “see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). The self-righteousness in us may hope that the unjust and violent will wail with grief at what they’ve done to God’s creation. Yet, the real hope and greater conviction is that God truly is the beginning and end of everything — language, thought, imagination, life and all that is beyond our knowledge or comprehension.



What difference does it make if one lives confidently believing God is “the Alpha and the Omega,” the beginning and ending?

In **John 18:33-37**, the Roman official Pilate’s manipulative interrogation of Jesus does not hold under Jesus’ own question and clarity of calling. Jesus points to a reign that judges Pilate’s realm

as only political. When asked if he is a king, Jesus doesn't answer "yes" or "no," but instead points to his very reason for being born, "to testify to the truth" (verse 37). Power doesn't rest in position, but in Jesus speaking the truth to power. LGBT people and the church, together, are called to follow Jesus' lead. We speak the truth in the world around us, declaring sometimes "yes," sometimes "no," grounded in God's reign of justice and love.

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus answers questions with questions, and speaks with a depth that frustrates those he engages. Today, there seem to be times when conversations between LGBT folks and those who battle against them are frustrating in a similar kind of way. In exploring this passage, April Baker reflected her experience with such conversations: "I speak conservative Christian very well. It's the language of my childhood and certainly of my culture as a southerner. So, when I talk to people using their vocabulary, but speak a different message than they have heard before, puzzled stares are common. 'But what about...' 'But the Bible says...' 'But how can you...' become the responses, not unlike Pilate's attempt to talk to Jesus. Done well, this can be a good way of pointing out another way of being or thinking. On the other hand, this method can also be used to demean another or try to embarrass them or catch them in their ignorance. Truth and grace should be inextricably bound in this kind of conversation."



When have you felt the frustration of communicating who you are with someone who didn't understand? How can you remain faithful through these encounters?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Powerful God,
when we are at our most vulnerable
help us rest our hope in you.
Remind us that strength
may be used for hurting or for love,
and that when you are the source of our strength
no hurtful power can overcome it.
Make us more loving, more kind;
but never let us stop striving
for the establishment of liberation and justice
in your righteous reign.
Amen.

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