

Doors, not Walls

Matthew 7:15-20

Sermon by Joanne Gallardo

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¹⁵“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will know them by their fruits.

To be honest, I don’t like this sermon. I see the importance of this series, but I don’t like it. For straight people it’s one thing, but for a person from the LGBTQ community to give a sermon about why they’re for LGBTQ inclusion in the church? Why maybe you should consider LGBTQ inclusion in the church? Giving you a Biblical basis for LGBTQ inclusion in the church? Or give you further affirmation that you do not want LGBTQ inclusion in the church? It’s strange to me. And as a person who sees the question of LGBTQ inclusion through a social justice lens, fruit from the same tree of accepting people from other races and cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds, this seems...weird. Like maybe I shouldn’t be the one talking. Or maybe I’m exactly the person who should be talking? I don’t know the answer to that.

But if I’m to get over myself and put myself in another person’s shoes, particularly another person who thinks differently from me, the idea of this sermon makes total sense. I know for a fact that others find my views, particularly equating LGBTQ inclusion as a social justice discussion on par with the discussion around exclusion being equated to the other “phobias” of our day, as deeply offensive. What is my theology surrounding inclusion, and why does it matter? It’s obvious why it matters to me, but why should it matter to you, as a person in our congregation here in this time and space?

I think it matters because the cultural landscape is changing, and with it the broader church. People who are different from the norm are coming out of their closets, living into who God has made them to be, and they want to connect to this God who has created them. We have an opportunity here, as the Church, both local and institutional. We can either cling on to theology shaped centuries ago by men who had no concept of realities like homosexuality, being transgender, or bisexuality, or we can “be transformed” as the epistles say and open our minds to the possibility that God may be moving and working in ways and in people we didn’t expect. Maybe we need to look in the mirror and come to face the inconvenient truth that for this LGBTQ community Church has been the oppressor. This oppression coming from people who had one time been oppressed themselves. And when you’re in that narrative dominance,

equality and inclusion can feel like oppression and that is a difficult feeling to confront and face. It's difficult, just as the Christian life is difficult.

Speaking of difficult things, it's difficult for me to give a Biblical basis for inclusion. Not because it speaks to the opposition of inclusion, but because the very concept of being LGBT or Q was simply not a thing back in scriptural times. This has been reiterated in the sermons of this series. Of course there were gay people, but there was no word in Greek or Hebrew for "homosexuality." Scriptures that reference sexuality are kind of scary. On one hand, men shouldn't lie with other men or so we read, but then abusing, raping, and cutting up a Levite concubine is TOALLY a thing. Raping Tamar is a thing. Incest is a thing. The Bible is a mixed bag when it comes to sex and it's certainly not rated PG. If we're going to talk about Biblical sexuality I think we should REALLY talk about Biblical sexuality. And this is a whole other sermon that I will give at another time. My main point is that the Bible says many things, but Jesus never once pays the topic of homosexuality any mind. Sexual immorality, of course, but if you look at the Old Testament (and the list I just gave), he has quite a lot of things to talk about and reference. I'm not at all equating being LGBTQ as a topic on the same level as sexual violence and incest, I'm merely saying if we want to talk about sex and the Bible, let's really talk about what the Bible contains and not avoid subjects the Bible has no problem with giving air time to.

A few weeks ago I wrote a response piece for The Mennonite after someone wrote what I found to be an offensive article about why the topic of LGBTQ inclusion is so difficult for the church. I wrote that for me, this boils down to the story in the book of Acts where an errant jailer asks Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved. They replied that if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you and your household will be saved. There are no qualifiers, no modifications, just the simplistic message of belief and covenant.

I went on to say that it's a very human thing to want to "limit" this salvation, especially when we're feelings self righteous with our "right living." We use "right living" as a weapon against anyone who does things we don't like. We also tend to limit "right living" to sex related subjects and ignore things like usury, coveting, mixing our textiles and shellfish. I know I'd like to be in a special club that God favors, we all do. But that's not how the Kingdom of God works. Jesus tells us in the Parable of the Workers that a landowner went out and hired people to work in his vineyard. He hired people at various points in the day, and at 5 pm he found people who still hadn't been hired. They were willing to work, but had thus far been excluded. The landowner lets them work, and at the end of the day pays them all a denarius, as was promised. The "early in the day" workers balk at this, saying that those who have only worked an hour shouldn't deserve the same amount of money. The landowner tells them, "I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own

money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:14-15) I think we are indeed envious because God is generous. Those who we think are undeserving are actually just as deserving as anybody else.

We are also afraid of what we don't know, myself included. The root of all “phobia,” be that homophobia, xenophobia, racism, and bigotry comes from fear of the unknown. People who love someone of the same gender, who don't identify with any gender, people who don't worship in the ways we do, people who don't look like we do, and people who have customs and cultures different from us are scary because the dominant culture tells us that we should be scared. Jesus' example and teaching show that crossing barriers in the name of love is at the heart of the Christian message. We are not given a spirit of fear, as 2nd Timothy 1:7 states, but “but of power, love and a sound mind.”

Another fear I have when we practice exclusion of any kind is that we don't trust God to do God's work in the world. When the question of LGBTQ inclusion arises, we are certain that God cannot work through or be dwelling in “those” people because of “sin,” or some other such language that has been constructed to keep queer folk “in their place” and out of the life of the Church. This same rhetoric was used against people of color (think Curse of Ham) and in other scriptures regarding maintaining slavery. By deciding ourselves who's “in” and who's “out,” are we allowing God to work in God's unexpected ways? Or are we hindering God, placing limits on what God can and cannot do; who God should and should not accept? These, my friends, are biblical frameworks that involve the inclusion of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. But I could talk all day about that. I have my own personal story that involves me moving from a place of not understanding inclusion to being an inclusive Mennonite pastor.

I was told to not go to Goshen College by my well meaning Northwest Ohio friends because it would “make me gay.” I stand before you a queer 34 year old Latina, but it has nothing to do with Goshen College, I can tell you that for sure. “They party there, they'll make you experiment” one person told me in hushed tones in study hall. “They have a lesbian dorm,” another of my church members told me one Sunday after services. I later found out this was supposedly Culp Hall, a hall I never inhabited, and strangely, my friends on campus who were lesbian lived elsewhere. Little did they know they had their own dorm!

I was flustered by these comments, but it did not deter me from moving to this town. While I was not ok with “the homosexual agenda,” I was mostly sure gay people didn't recruit. I was also pretty sure they weren't kidnappers or pedophiles like I had been taught growing up, just mentally sick people in need of God's love and support. Love the sinner, hate the sin after all.

During my freshman year, I met a lot of people who had different thoughts than me. I had never met a single person who identified as LGBTQ. But my friends had. My first year

roommate and I, Miriam Auguburger, who was a member here, had a friend named Katie. Katie had relatives who weren't going to get married until all people, including same-sex couples, could get married. I was floored. "What?" I later asked Miriam. "Can you believe what you heard?" Miriam was also from Ohio so I made some assumptions about what she thought. But she was with me and said, "Yeah, that's weird." So Katie became my first "super liberal friend." Note Katie had not stated her own thoughts on the matter, she merely had relatives who were active in the ally community. To me and my mind, that made her just like them.

Side story about Miriam. After grad school she was looking for a job. She was offered a job by a tangentially Anabaptist college. She was super excited about the possibility of teaching at a college level. It was her dream. However, they had a few questions to ask her before going through with hiring her. What were her thoughts on gay people? How would she instruct a student who had come out to her? What did she think was part of an acceptable Christian lifestyle? Does she believe what the Bible says about homosexuals? Miriam, being perceptive and smart, knew where this was going. She told them that she wasn't going to say what they wanted to hear, and that she believed God loves everyone. So they could take their job, she didn't want it. Luckily, Miriam found work elsewhere, not at a college.

Back to my freshman experience, I met a student during my first few weeks of classes, someone I am still friends with. I'll call him Tom. Tom and I had the same major, he had a gorgeous voice, and he also worked with Campus Ministries, just like me. I had no idea that this person was gay. He loved ministry, like I did. He had a whole bunch of gifts to offer our community. He was a good person, a good friend, and a good student. When I found out he was gay, I was flabbergasted. How could someone actively doing ministry be gay? Was that allowed? Did no one else have a problem with this?

I brought this up to one of my pastors. She asked me, "So you don't think LGBTQ people should be allowed in the church? You want to keep a group of people out?" I thought that was extreme. I distinctly remember saying that no, I didn't think like that, but surely they can't hold leadership positions in the church. She set down what she was doing and looked me right in the eye and said, "If you accept a person, you accept their gifts, don't you?" Well, she had me there. This ideology I had built for myself was quickly crumbling. By having LGBTQ people in my faith community, I needed to accept everything they had to offer. This was not a case where they needed to learn things from "our" community, we had to learn from them, as well. And if they brought the leadership skills, the passion for worship, or finance, or care giving, who are we to stop people from furthering the Kingdom of God?

My views started to change. I wondered what it would be like if I didn't ask questions or place qualifiers on my faith community. What would change in me? A whole lot changed. I was welcomed wholeheartedly as an ally. My friendship circle grew and became more diverse in

multiple ways. My heart was moved in understanding the LGBTQ fight for equal rights and acceptance. I read up on gay civil rights leaders and gay icons. As I like to say it, the rainbow slowly crept into my life and stayed there, and made me a better person for it. And when my own sexuality changed, something I never expected, this community I had been a part of for years never once questioned me, or called my sexuality into question, or made me feel like an outsider. The more and more I became involved in the community, I thought back to the people who had taught me that gay folk were somehow deviant. I thought, "How much you're missing! The love, the inclusion, the involvement!" By having previously shut people out, I was hurting myself in a big way. This community wasn't hurting, I was the one who was hurting and missing out on a more enriched life.

For a long time I ignored the "T" in LGBTQ. I didn't know any trans people, or so I thought. In reality, I knew quite a few folks. But my first genuine encounter with a trans woman came in roller derby. Believe it or not, there are many trans women in roller derby. One woman's derby name was "The Diva." She played for a lot of teams. I really wanted to be like her. She glided on the track, she committed just the right number of penalties so as not to get kicked out of the game but also show the other team who was in charge, and she played every position like she was a pro. But I was confused. Trans folk were allowed to play on a women's team? Was that fair? How did the other women feel about that?

I was called out on my loud opinions by another player who claimed I was only bringing this up because she played for another team. If she played for our team, I would be fine with it. And that was exactly right, I didn't care about this woman's humanity, I cared about winning. And I was supremely jealous. So I talked to her. It turns out she had quite the childhood. She knew she wasn't a boy, but was constantly being thrown into sports like football, baseball, and hunting...things that made her feel like a failure and maybe a mis-created person. Then she saw women doing roller derby and knew that was the sport for her. Her physical appearance began to change as she grew confidence in this sport. She became really good at something, and while her parents weren't proud, she was proud of herself. She told me she was created for this sport. She had a home and a purpose. This story makes me really happy, but it also makes me feel like so many of us miss out on knowing people like her because of our prejudices. What if a faith community had told her she was ok, just as she was...what if the perfect sport never came along? I can't help but wonder if the church might have been a refuge for her, as well.

Jesus tells us the story of the good tree and the bad tree. It's fairly simple, a good tree bears good fruit, a bad tree bears bad fruit, and you can tell which is which by their fruit. A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and vice versa. So look at the fruit.

So lately I've been looking at the fruit of some important people in my life. And I've thought of Berkey. I've especially thought of the people who haven't looked at me or spoken 1 word to me

since I've arrived over a year ago, and how that has caused me to feel very unwelcome at times. These aren't bad people, but is it possible for a good tree to just bear...some unfair fruit? I think of people who prefer not to think of me as their pastor, and have told me so, or told others so...who then tell me so. Then there is that which is just plain hurtful that comes out of a place of not knowing. Not knowing me, or not knowing queer folk, Latinx folk, women folk, and I often reflect on the profound impact this has had on me as a person and as a professional. I also often think of how incredibly sad this makes me. I think of the former friends I've talked about my sexuality with who have told me I'm going through a phase, or I'm making it up, or they don't understand so it's not valid. I think of people all around the capital C Church who have built walls around themselves to keep me out and others in. To me, this wall building is not good fruit. God is not a God of walls, or of exclusion, but of embrace and welcome. This fruit is not good fruit to me, and I do my best to remind myself that this says more about the tree than it does about me, but it's something that becomes more and more difficult to believe in every time it happens. Then I remember all the good fruit. The welcome I've felt, the way I've seen this congregation treat others in need, the amount of care that goes into our church projects, the people in my life who have opened doors to me, people who love me no matter what, and people who stand up for me and my right to be who I am in the world. And I think of people who serve as that kind of person for others. I see all this good fruit and I think of the good trees these fruits come from, and my heart is encouraged.

Berkey is a congregation that bears good fruit. We are openers of doors, not builders of walls. We have a choice whether or not we want to live into this, or if we want to move away from it. It is my sincere hope that while we may have differing views and perspectives, and that these are gifts from God, that we also remind ourselves who might be waiting outside the door...maybe it's someone like The Diva. Or my friend Tom. Maybe it's folks who find more community in LGBTQ spaces than they ever have in the Church. Maybe it's someone like me. Should we be thinking about walls? Or do we need a few more doors?