

Sermon Sunday, June 28, 2015
Greenbelt Community Church
Mark Granfors-Hunt
“Jesus Reveals the Radical Inclusiveness of God”
Mark 5:21-43

This has been quite a week, hasn't it? We began on Monday by hearing how Confederate Battle flags all around the country are finally being taken down. One commentator noted that it's as if many in the country finally woke up and saw the flag as for what it is, a symbol of hatred and violence, especially against blacks in this country.” Comedian John Oliver called it "one of those symbols that really should only be seen on T-shirts, belt buckles and bumper stickers to help the rest of us identify the worst people in the world," Believe it or not, Walmart led the way by taking items bearing the flag off the shelf and refusing to sell them, followed by Sears, Amazon, eBay, Google and Etsy.

Thursday the Supreme Court upheld the Affordable Care Act by allowing federal funding in states that have not set up their own exchanges, ensuring health insurance coverage for millions of Americans. Then on Friday the same Supreme Court ruled that it is unconstitutional for states to deny same sex marriage, paving the way for same sex marriages in all fifty states. Of course, one of the first questions I read was whether clergy will be *required* to perform same sex weddings. All I will say about that is clergy have always had the freedom to say no to officiating a wedding, so why should that change?

Wow, what a week.

When Pastor Glenyce asked me to provide scripture and a sermon title for this morning, Bruce Jenner was in the middle of making his public transition into Caitlyn Jenner. I looked at the lectionary passages for this Sunday, which included the reading that Louise presented for us from Mark, chapter five, and thought to

myself, “what a great piece of scripture to work from to talk about the radical inclusiveness of God as expressed in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.”

When people in the UCC talk about inclusiveness, they talk about those who are on the margins of society being included in and having access to the same kind of services, respect and standing that the majority of us in the United States have. We view God as a God whose desire is justice, equity and fairness for all of creation, not simply for the few who can afford to purchase it. The fall of the Confederate Battle flag is a symbolic victory for those who had been literally enslaved and treated like chattel because of the color of their skin, and who to this day continue to be treated as second class citizens in far too many ways. The affirmation of the Affordable Care Act provides many lower middle class and poor families access to affordable health care, care that was previously unavailable to them. Marriage equality is also a justice issue, enabling same sex partners the same benefits (and obligations) as in traditional marriages, taking away some of the stigma and normalizing what many see as un-normal relationships.

What does it mean when we say, “Whoever you are, where ever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here?” Or when we say “God is still speaking?”

In part it means sharing your church as a place of welcome, as a place of safety and refuge, not just for yourself but also with those who are different, with those you may not even understand. Safety for those who run from the hatred of segregation, whether they are from our own country or from abroad. Safety for those who have little, who cannot afford the health care they desperately need, but at least can find a place to sit for a spell and not be judged too harshly for suffering the horrible sin of being broke. Welcome and safety for those who need a place to simply be who they are sexually, whether Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender.

We may not know what it is like to be judged with contempt for the color of our skin and our cultural heritage. We may not know what it is like to be so poor

that we cannot afford to see a doctor, or worse, to be so poor that we cannot provide medical care for our children or loved ones, and then to be ostracized and looked upon with disdain. We may not know what it is like to love another man if you are a man, or to love another woman if you are a woman and to be spat upon, called an abomination and be forced to hide who you are simply to keep yourself safe from harm.

There are many, many things that we will never, ever understand. Like what it's like to win a multi-million dollar lottery, or to fly in outer space, or to have superpowers like the X-men, or why, if I feel so young, does my reflection look so old.

“Whoever you are, where ever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here!” Even if you don’t understand someone, this is God’s house, and in God’s house, all are welcome. Share your wealth! Dare to be a little communal in nature! Part of the wealth of Greenbelt Community Church is your warmth, your welcome and your hospitality for those who cross through the doors to the church. You don’t have to like it, you just have to do it. Why? Because that is who we are encouraged to be as a people of Christ, following the examples found in the ministry of Jesus.

We are also fond of saying in the United Church of Christ “God is still speaking!” That means we can be empowered to seek and find the divine presence of God in our own lives, and see it manifested in the lives of those around us. That means we can read a piece of scripture, a parable or a story, and see how it relates to our contemporary environment.

For instance, in this morning’s gospel lesson we hear about a woman daring to force herself onto Jesus. This woman is an outsider, an outcast, one who is ritually unclean and all decent people stay away from her. To even be touched by her makes one ritually unclean, and for twelve years she has been doing all she can to fit in and become acceptable, to no avail. Jesus welcomes her as a daughter and

heals the rift between her and community by making her whole. The story may be read as a simple story of the healing of a woman with an ongoing blood flow. But because “God is still speaking,” we may look a little deeper than the obvious physical ailment and see the underlying social conventions and customs that kept her on the fringes of society and ostracized her from family. We can look to our present day world for similar instances where people are ostracized by family and friends simply for being who they are because they do not fit our modern definition of what it means to be ritually clean. The woman in scripture does not have a name, but what if we give her a name and call her...Caitlyn?

For instance, what if Caitlyn Jenner were to walk into our church for worship next Sunday? Would our extravagant welcome and hospitality extend to her? Would she feel she had entered a sanctuary of God and could be simply accepted as she is as a child of God, and not be judged or ostracized? Or would we stare and mutter to ourselves, wondering who she thinks she/he is, strutting around on magazine covers and profaning God’s will by transforming her gender?

I don’t mean this as an indictment! If Caitlyn Jenner showed up here I would be tongue tied and not know what to say. Her celebrity status would overwhelm my common sense and I would either run away or say some incredibly stupid things in conversation with her like, “So, you’re a woman now...uh...so...where do you go the bathroom, the men’s room or the women’s room?”

Jenner’s celebrity status works both for and against transgender awareness building. The positive is that she can talk openly about her experiences and what led her to her change, allowing her celebrity status to open doors not available to others. A negative is that some may simply see her as just another celebrity who will do anything to get more for themselves.

Now, what does it mean to be transgender? The APA, (American Psychological Association) defines transgender in this way: *Transgender is an*

umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth. While transgender is generally a good term to use, not everyone whose appearance or behavior is gender-nonconforming will identify as a transgender person. The ways that transgender people are talked about in popular culture, academia and science are constantly changing, particularly as individuals' awareness, knowledge and openness about transgender people and their experiences grow.

It is important to note that being transgender is no longer considered to be a mental illness of which someone may then be treated and cured. It is not a condition, like psoriasis, nor is it anything that makes a person ritually unclean and unfit to integrate into society, like our woman in scripture who was hemorrhaging for twelve years.

Also this week in the Washington Post was a story, reported by Valerie Strauss, about a young man named Schuyler Bailar who grew up in our area and has been accepted into Harvard for college.

Born physically as a girl but always feeling psychologically like a boy, Bailar dreamed of growing up to be a dad, never a mom. He dressed like a boy, acted like a boy, hung out with boys — except during a period in high school when he tried to fit in as a girl which only made him more desperate.

Now 19, Bailar, grew up in McLean, Va., fighting bouts of depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and eating disorders. He spent a tortuous year of self-reckoning in his lifelong quest to feel comfortable in his own skin, including 131 days in a Miami treatment center for eating disorders where he began to face his gender confusion, then a three day nervous breakdown when he came to face his gender identity. During this time, he finally came to terms with his identity and how he wants to spend the rest of his life. He knows he wants to live as “normal” a

life as possible given his circumstances, but he also wants to help other young people who feel as if they don't belong in the body they got at birth. So, he said, if it means being public, that's what he'll do.

Experts don't know why some people are physically born one sex but psychologically are the opposite, but they believe it results from a mixture of genetics, hormone levels and life experiences. Gender identity generally solidifies for most children between ages 4 and 6, but children who don't feel the way they look don't understand the concept of being transgender. Bailar says it is difficult to explain how one can be physically born female but feel male; he just knows who he is.

Bailar got lucky in some very important ways. When he admitted to himself that he was transgender last year and told his parents, Terry Hong and Gregor Bailar. They immediately accepted the change, as did all four of his grandparents, including his religious Korean grandmother, whom Bailar was concerned would not understand. When he told her, she said: "Well, I knew that. Now I have two grandsons from your mother." The importance of having parental support cannot be overstated, Bailar said. "When your parents are your first bullies, it can be impossible," he said.

According to the Williams Institute who worked in partnership with The American Institute for Suicide Prevention, 41 percent of those who identify as Transgender or gender non-conforming have attempted suicide. The national average is 4.6 percent. Forty one percent is ten times higher than the national average. If you think you have trouble fitting in, just think what it might be like if it was ten times harder and how you might react.

Anti-discrimination laws in most U.S. cities and states, writes the APA, do not protect transgender people from discrimination based on gender identity or gender expression. Consequently, transgender people in most cities and states face

pervasive and severe discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives. People of color in general fare worse than White transgender people, with African American transgender individuals faring far worse than all other transgender populations examined.

“Our bottom line is we just want a happy, healthy, contented, safe kid, whatever form that takes,” said Bailar’s mother, Terry Hong. “We adjust our normalities, whatever that means, so that we can provide an environment where the kids feel they can tell us anything and they can be as true to themselves, authentic to themselves, as possible.”

Perhaps that is how God sees us, looking down from heaven above, guiding us through scripture and song, opening up to our prayers and supplications and assisting us in our worship environment to be able to speak freely to the Divine One through prayer, and to provide that same love, openness and non-judgmental presence that we feel we receive to those we may not understand so that like Bailar’s mother says, *we can provide an environment where everyone can be as true to themselves, authentic to themselves, as possible.*”

Then we will truly be a people who can rejoice and say, “Whoever you are, wherever you are on God’s journey, you are welcome here.”