

**Kyle Kentopp, Ministerial Intern
Pilgrim United Church of Christ
May 29, 2016**

Scripture: Isaiah 56:3-5 and Matthew 19:10-12

Since the passage of HB2 a couple months ago, I've struggled with how best to address it. As a transgender individual myself, I have already shared my story here and in several other forums before HB2 was even conceived because I felt it was important to put a human face to an experience that is so sensationalized. I've said before that I didn't even know what it meant to be transgender for a long time because I never had any representations of transgender individuals to identify with. The only exposure I had was from the Rocky Horror Picture Show, and as iconic as that movie is, it didn't help to make the transgender experience seem any less strange. So I can understand why there's so much ignorance surrounding this topic, and I'm grateful that in the last few years transgender celebrities have risen into the public spotlight with grace and elegance, such as Laverne Cox from Orange is the New Black. She too has taken the time to share her story, answer questions, and respectfully teach others when a question is too invasive as others sometimes forget that just as you would not like to talk about your anatomy in public places with strangers neither do we. With the representation Laverne Cox and others have provided, more transgender people have come out and been open with their experiences, which is incredible and I celebrate that. Yet this newfound attention coupled with the passage of national marriage equality has brought up quite a backlash particularly from religious groups who fear America is running away with immorality and messing with the natural ways God created humankind.

This is what's interesting to me so let's explore it. Politicians and the religious groups supporting HB2 and similar bills in our state and around the country seem to honestly believe that this issue has just appeared, that transgender people have just appeared, as some new form of perversion threatening the safety and security of a strictly male or female world. What they don't seem to understand is that this debate has already happened thousands of years ago. Humans have already debated the legitimacy of a transgender life and if a transgender individual is perverting God's creation or instead is created and loved by God exactly as they are. One can find

transgender people all throughout history. Native American traditions believed transgender, or Two-Spirit, people held some closer connection with their divinity and were revered as spiritual teachers and healers. Greek mythology speaks of a god that lived as a male then was turned into a female for a number of years and was then consulted when questions arose about the different experiences of men and women. Perhaps most interestingly for us as a Christian congregation, the bible records the different sides of this debate during its own span of time, even including characters who do not fit neatly into a stereotypically male or female role. For example, scholars are finding that the Hebrew word used for Joseph's technicolor coat is the same for a princess's dress. Jesus too is known for stepping out of the male gender role by using feminine imagery in his parables, such as referring to himself as a mother hen looking after her roost. Plus we have to make the point that if there really was a miraculous virgin birth, Jesus would technically only have X chromosomes and would therefore be, at least on the chromosomal level, female living as male. But anyway, religious groups who don't believe in the sanctity of transgender lives are quick to cite the verse from Deuteronomy that says women should not wear men's clothing nor should men wear women's, yet this completely disregards the fact that the bible also includes a surprising number of verses that state transgender individuals are just as loved and are just as capable of entering into the kingdom of heaven as anyone else such as the verses we just read.

Now the term "eunuch" is obviously an outdated one and scholars have a difficult time pinning down exactly what this term refers to. The clearest historical presence of eunuchs often appear as the manager of a king's harem, undergoing castration so as not to be a threat to the women under his care. This is our biggest clue this has something to do with someone transcending traditional gender roles. It seems that in this particular case, these men were often placed into these circumstances as a kind of punishment and therefore had no choice over the matter. Yet we see in Matthew that eunuchs cannot be solely attributed to this profession just as their situation cannot be solely attributed to a punishment. Matthew declares that there are eunuchs who were "born that way," probably referring to intersex people, people who have some sort of combination of female and male anatomical attributes. There are "eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others" meaning they have undergone some kind of procedure to align their outward appearance better with their inner self.

Then there are “those who chose to live like eunuchs” which may refer to transgender individuals who elect not to have any kind of procedure either due to choice or lack of resources available to them. The bible therefore lays out for us the many different ways transgender people are born and the paths they may take in order to become closest to who they are. And at this point the question becomes if transgender people have always had to try so hard to align their inner selves and outer bodies, are we not divine mistakes? Should I not have been born a biological male yet by some Godly oversight instead was born into the wrong body? Once again, we turn to the bible.

First of all, I'd like to say that if God even were capable of a mistake that She surely would have figured out how to correct it by now. Yet the continued presence of transgender individuals all throughout human history might point to some divine declarative statement in itself that we are crafted exactly the way we are for some greater purpose. Is the creator of the ever-expanding universe honestly held to a strict and exclusive model of male and female? Or do we believe that the God beyond all knowledge and understanding can be as creative with His creation as He pleases? We find in the bible these very questions, this very debate. The answer written in the Hebrew Scriptures in the book of Isaiah is that we should not even question the radical love God has for each and every one of us, including the transgender community. We were created in love, and we are held in love throughout our lives. Yahweh declares that the transgender people who follow God will have a name even better than that of daughters and sons. Now, I don't think God means that transgender people are actually better, but I do believe God is acknowledging that humans will not understand us, humans will try to separate us from God and make us feel ashamed of ourselves as we have been created. They will tell us we cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven, that we are doomed to hell for our perversion. They will write laws to discriminate against us, they will harass and harm us out of fear. So many of us will die simply trying to live an honest life. To be able to face that everyday and yet continue to retain a close, personal relationship with God and continue to do God's work here on earth is a feat. And I don't necessarily mean that a trans person has to be Christian to be saved. I mean if a transgender person is able to accept themselves and courageously fight for who they are, for who they were divinely crafted to be, that is a sacred act in itself. To fight against death in

order to experience the miracle of life that stems from the breath of the divine is truly a radical act of worship.

My friends, it has seemed for a while now that HB2 will come to its end hopefully soon regardless of how our state's government has stubbornly clung to it while our economy has suffered. However its important to realize that in all likelihood this is just the beginning. Trans individuals are already disadvantaged or placed in direct danger in every facet of everyday living, whether it be the bathrooms, healthcare, job security, or the simple security of knowing you are loved and accepted. This is why 41 percent of trans individuals have reported attempting suicide at least once in their life. Our lives are already so fragile. We cannot afford to have any more strain, any more question, any more harm done to us. What we need now more than ever is for our stories to be legitimized, and this is what I've loved about the response to HB2. On the night it passed, a black transgender woman was videotaped dancing in front of policemen outside the governor's mansion. I cried watching her bravery as the intersectionalities of her identity make her part of one of the most targeted demographics and yet as this bill passed which further places her in danger, she sets out for the governor's mansion to dance. This is how we have responded as a whole. By sharing our stories with our best attempt at grace and elegance, by forcing others to see a glimmer of humanity in our eyes. By a simple phrase that we shout in defiance all day long until we settle into our beds at night and our shouts turn into a self assuring prayer: I am human, I am human, I am human.

I implore those of you ready to join us as we attempt to open up honest conversation by sharing our stories. I challenge you to have grace-filled conversations with others who might not understand what it means to be transgender, or that this debate has already come and gone with the clear answer that we are divinely created as exactly as we are and radically loved just so. And if you yourself are unsure, I challenge you to educate yourself. Read books, talk to others, look into the sacred scriptures that chronicle these debates as they have happened in the past. I truly believe that these debates and the subsequent harm they might bring to the transgender community stems most honestly through ignorance. This is why we must declare again and again until we are heard and understood that there is humanity and sanctity in a transgender life. You want to talk about God? God has already spoken and as she continues to speak, the

answer has not changed. Just as everyone else, a transgender life was intentionally crafted, wonderfully made, and is held in divine love. We are doing God's work to remember that, and to do our best to look out for and protect those whose voice has been taken. We are human, and we deserve to be treated as such.