

Mandy Mizelle Norris
Pilgrim United Church of Christ
NC Pride Sunday: September 25, 2016

Scripture: [John 20:19-29](#)

It's been a long and loud and *colorful* weekend around here:

- a wedding rehearsal Friday night
- the Pride festival and Communion service and parade yesterday (in weather that was too hot for the end of September -- no wonder so many people didn't have on enough clothes!)
- Suzanne and Leigh's beautiful and perfect Song on Solomon inspired wedding yesterday afternoon...

By the time I got home last night, I was exhausted and still didn't have my meditation together. So when a couple of friends asked if Janel and I wanted to join them at a gay bar in town for post-Pride celebration, I said, "Sure -- it'll be sermon research."

Jesus heard me. And he said, "Ask and it shall be given to you." While I was out taking in the crowd, watching drag queens perform, and my people celebrate who they are, on two separate occasions, two women who recognized me from Pilgrim came up to me -- like Jesus to the disciples hovering in the upper room -- to have serious theological conversations in the midst of all the noise and energy and... wigs.

One of them, who has visited our church before, talked about how much she loves it here -- "even though she's a skeptic." "Even though she's a science person" she said, she feels something *real* here. As if science and spirituality, doubting and seeking, are separate worlds and conversations.

I wonder if what we do here, maybe more than anything else, is dissolve the boundaries, the separate worlds we have imagined and tended... the boundaries between science and spirituality,

questioning and faith, Pride festivities and sermon preparation...

For the past three weeks, leading up to Pride Sunday, that's what our adult Sunday school group has been talking about in our Theology of Radical Love class. Radical Love is a concept from queer theology -- theology connected to the experiences of the LGBTQ, or queer, community.

Radical Love is a love so extreme that it erases our existing boundaries, our either/or understandings of the world, our preconceived notions and boxes. Christianity and the LGBTQ community are both grounded in the experience of Radical Love, connecting them in a way far too many people, for far too long, have felt a divide.

According to queer theology, God is the continuous sending forth of radical love, and Jesus is the embodiment of radical love; Jesus is radical love made flesh.

In the Gospel of John, where today's story comes from, this is how we see Jesus -- the embodiment of radical love. He calls the disciples "friends," washing their feet, sharing openly with them, giving his life for them. Jesus' love for his friends is not abstract, but embodied -- it is words *made flesh*. The disciples come to know God through their relationships with Jesus, who urges them to continue LIVING in LOVING acts of friendship.

After the crucifixion, the disciples interpret acts of friendship to include a game of hide and seek -- focusing on the hiding part. In today's passage, they are locked away in isolation, in fear. Jesus was killed because of his blatant disregard for religious law and his radical embracing of the wrong kinds of people, and they are worried about what will happen to them. They don't seem to be taking up the foot-washing business.

So they quarantine themselves in this house, bearing odor instead of fruit. All of the disciples... except Thomas. Where is Thomas? We don't know, but wherever he was, at least he hadn't locked himself away. Maybe he was less afraid than the others. Maybe while others were hiding, he was seeking. He has a reputation for being an evidence

enthusiast, after all. Whatever the case, when the group is reunited, the rest of the disciples tell him about their encounter with Jesus, but Thomas isn't convinced. He doesn't believe his friends. His unbelief is not about Jesus; it's about not trusting *his friends*. It's about denying their stories, their experiences -- in a way, it's about denying *them*.

This narrative continues to be known as the story of "Doubting Thomas," and maybe that's fair. By rejecting his friends' encounter with Jesus, their news, their excitement, Thomas is a doubter -- of his friends' perceptions and credibility. But he is not the only hesitant soul in this text: the other disciples are *still* secluding themselves behind shut doors even after Jesus visits them! Like the children's animated television series, the text should be called "Doubting Thomas *and Friends*."

Although tradition has tended to cast doubt solely on Thomas, I don't see that as what Jesus is doing here. Rather than condemning Thomas for his disbelief, Jesus allows -- even invites -- Thomas to touch his wounds. Jesus *asks* Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Jesus does not definitively announce that is the case, or that Thomas is wrong for doing so, but leaves Thomas -- and us -- to think about it. He adds, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." The *blessing* is a declaration, but that does not indict Thomas. *Why do we so often equate a blessing of one with condemnation of another?*

Interestingly, the text doesn't say whether or not Thomas actually takes Jesus up on the offer to "put [his] finger in [his] side." Like a lot of things -- skydiving, agreeing to march in a parade in 90 degree weather, asking to preach on a weekend you're already doing a thousand things -- it probably sounded like a better idea before the opportunity actually presented itself. Whether Thomas touched Jesus' side or not, the reactions of *all* of the disciples indicate that

there is something about seeing Jesus' scars that is revelatory. Jesus' willingness to show his wounds -- even to let them be touched -- intimately reveals who their friend is in the most concrete of ways: **someone who is open and honest with them, someone**

**whose entire being bears the love he feels for them,
someone who embodies a *present, deeply feeling*
*God-with-us.***

In our class this morning, Kathy wondered if Jesus came to us as God-made-flesh to remind us that we, too, are divine.

Jesus not only resurrects their faith in him, but he reminds the disciples of *his* faith in *them*. He reawakens their friendship as something they have and something they must *enact*, beyond the bounds of their current self-imposed exile. In a bold move, Jesus effectively cancels the first church lock in. *Inspiring* them -- with his own breath -- Jesus sends them as God has sent him. He empowers his friends to unshackle and move beyond doors that signal segregation and fear, to go out in peace with loving agency. And by showing his wounds, Jesus acknowledges that it's hard work, work that marks us -- as a target for those who reject love and light, but as *sanctuary* for all those who seek it.

Jesus reveals that belief is not only about having faith in God; it's also about having faith in each other and ourselves. We are, after all, a *community* of faith. Jesus reminds the disciples they are his *friends*. The love he has for them is not about what they do, though he thinks they are capable of a lot, but about *who they are*.

A couple of weeks ago, Pilgrim ambassador and theologian Beverly Ford said, "God created our differences. We created our boundaries."

I HOPE what we do here, maybe more than anything else, is dissolve the boundaries we have created --

between normal and queer,

between communities of color and police officers,

between privilege and disadvantage,
between ourselves and one another, ourselves and God,
between the world as it is and the world as it can be,
between mistakes and forgiveness,
between failure and success,
between despair and hope,
between life and death, death and resurrection...

May we breathe in the Radical Love that holds and is held within us
all, proudly embodying our differences, and crossing the boundaries
that would limit us as we go...

Amen.