

Matthew 16:21-28

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

August 30, 2020

Setting Our Mind on Divine Things

Well Happy Pride Sunday, my friends! It is such a blessing and seriously warms my heart and feeds my soul that we are able to come together to celebrate the beautiful diversity of God's Creation. This certainly has not always been the case, and in many churches and communities, it still isn't.

But in this space, we make a conscious and prayerful and hopeful effort to welcome diversity in all its forms and celebrate that difference as beauty, as strength, as a source of deep joy. That's what this day is all about: the beauty of the diverse, gathered body, united in love, and committed to creating space for every single being in God's beloved Creation where we can thrive, where we can love and be loved, where all of us can *belong*.

I feel deep down in my being that this is the truest, highest calling of those who would follow Jesus. This is the center, the core of his work. Society pushes folx with particular ailments or differences to the margins. This is the way of the world.

But Jesus went to those on the margins, grabbed those folx by the hand, and brought them to very center of the community. Jesus created a space for those who were different. He offered them healing of their ailments, body, mind and soul; and he invited the entire community back into relationship with one another.

Jesus offered hope and joy and restoration to all of them. For when he healed folx, he healed the entire community. Those who had been pushed to the side were brought back into the fold, given a space to thrive, where they could love and be loved, so that all of God's beloved could find a place to truly belong.

I believe this is what it means to set our minds on divine things. This is what we, Christ followers, are called and created to do. Because the divine, the holy, the Spirit of God, the breath of Life exists in each and every living being. And once we've tapped into this truth, once we've tasted the joy and the hope and completeness of this healing, we cannot help but seek this sense of belonging everywhere we go and for everyone we love.

When I think back on my childhood, I have a lot of happy memories, but I also have a lot of memories of just feeling so out of place. Like I almost belonged everywhere, and didn't really belong anywhere. Now, adolescence is hard. I want y'all to know if

you are 12-16 or you have a child who is in that range, I am praying for you. Daily. Because you really couldn't pay me \$1 million to go back, maybe a billion ... maybe.

It is hard to become, to learn and grow and create who we are, all while our bodies are in constant mutiny. The hormonal changes that happen in our bodies are truly sinister. However, that is just how it is, so we do our best to deal with it and get through it.

What is unavoidable, however, are those external betrayals that distract us or prevent us from becoming who we are. I am endlessly grateful to you, Mary Jo, for bringing *The Gender Wheel* to our worship today. This is truly a book that every single one of us could have really used growing up.

Because you see, when I was growing up, I was constantly told implicitly and explicitly that my worth was directly proportional to the attention of boys. I was told that I should be meek. That I should be submissive. That being different was bad. That being me was wrong.

Because I talked too much, surprise, surprise. I was too tall. Too smart. Too intimidating. Too me for the mold my community and society had created. But, I did what every impressionable and eager-to-belong person does: I contorted and shrunk myself so that I might kind of fit, kind of belong, kind of be liked, not loved, but liked.

There were simply far too few moments or spaces where I actually felt like I belonged. And I know that I am not alone in this. The ways in which we define who gets to belong and thrive, and who doesn't, are brutally exclusive and traumatizing for everyone.

If I were a betting woman, I would bet that in one way or another each and every one of you has been explicitly or implicitly made to conform to a mold that simply doesn't fit who you have been created to be.

And I hope that you have also found at least one space, if not many, where you have encouraged to flourish and grow and become and belong, just God has created you. And I pray that Stone Church is one of those places for each and every one of you.

You know, sometimes I think of Peter, and the other disciples, like one of those kids who no matter how hard they try, just never seem to fully fit in. That is, until Jesus. Until Jesus invited them on a journey, gave them purpose, and told them and everyone they met that they matter, that they are worthy, that they belong.

And I'll tell you, from experience, that when you find that kind of community, you feel compelled to work, and if necessary fight, so that you might maintain it. When you finally find your place, and you can rejoice and feel whole, where you can finally hope in a way you never thought you could, you will do anything. You will commit your entire life to preserving that space.

This is how I'm understanding Peter in this episode today. He had finally found a place to belong. With these fishers and farmers turned nomads and troublemakers. He finally felt healing and wholeness, he felt like with Jesus and with this community, he and his beloved people might finally find a place to thrive. He and his beloved might finally belong.

Thus, when Jesus tells him that he is going to die ... Jesus, the one who has made all of this possible. The one who has taught them how to belong, has challenged the authorities to make space for them to belong, and has performed miracles and healings to ensure that they belong. This Jesus dying, is truly unacceptable.

"Dear God, let this not be so!" cries Peter. I get it. I really do.

And you know, none of us really know the tone Jesus took with Peter, so this day I choose to hear it is as loving admonition.

"Get behind me, Satan. Do not be a stumbling block to me." Jesus himself was human and surely also felt a beautiful sense of belonging in his community. There must have been within him some doubt, some fear, some angst about what he was being called to do. We know this, for he prayed in the garden, "If it be your will, let this cup pass from me." Let this not be so.

But we also know that this Jesus is divine. This Jesus is fully attuned with the Holy, the breath of Life, the Divine Mind. Yes, he yearned for his beloved friends and community to be healthy, happy, whole, and have a place of belonging...and also he wanted that for every single living being in the world.

For every single boy, girl, and child who has been told they don't belong. For every man, woman, and person who has been told they don't deserve to thrive or be the person God created them to be. For every living being who has been cast aside or trampled upon. Jesus sought hope and wholeness, joy and peace, love and belonging for every last one of them.

And so, he tells his beloved friends, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

When we seek to hold onto only our own lives, our own comfort, our own resources, our own molds, no matter how inclusive we think they might already be...when we seek to hold too tightly to our own, individual lives, that is exactly the moment we lose them.

For you see, in this text, the Greek word for life is *psyche*. It's not just our physical body or the life we have on paper. Jesus is talking about our entire being. Our soul, our personhood, who we are.

In literally every religious tradition I have come across, every spirituality I have encountered, and when I really think about it, every personal experience of the divine that I've ever had, all point to the same truth:

We are one. We are one body. We are one Creation. We are interconnected and interdependent. We are intertwined with all living beings. When you strip everything else away, this is fundamentally who we are.

When we act like this is not so. When we put up barriers, and offer one another deformed molds, when we hold too tightly to our own families and community while casting aside those who don't "fit."

When we forget that we are one, we lose ourselves. We lose our lives because we lose who we truly are.

Jesus invited Peter and his disciples, Jesus invites us to set our minds on divine things by taking our experiences of belonging and hope and being able to thrive, and fighting not to sustain it just for our own selves, but to commit to creating these same transformative spaces for literally every living being.

Having tasted this feast, this divine connection and sustenance, this holy joy and hope, we shall be moved not to hoard this feast for us and those we love, but to commit to extending this feast to all. Even, and especially, when that means risking our own belonging, our own sustenance, our own lives, because those are the moments where we discover who we truly are. Those are those moments that allow us to find our lives.

On this Pride Sunday, no matter who you are or how you identify, know that you are made in the image of God. You are beautiful, you are worthy, you are everything God made you to be. And you are one with God and with all living beings.

Hold to this inner truth. Let it fuel you, inspire you, and guide you to live into it a little more each day, for you, for those you love, and for every living being.

In the name of the Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.